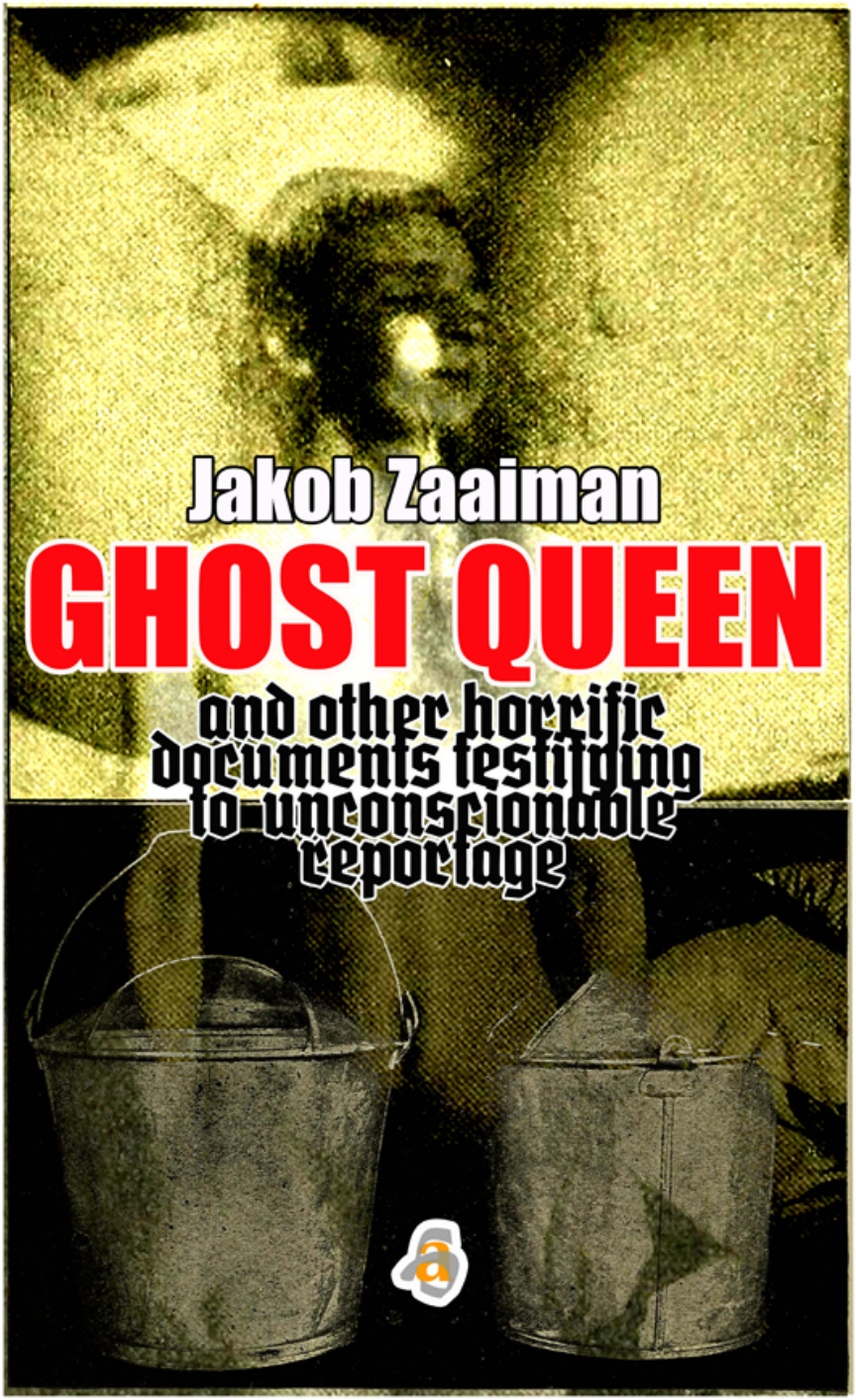
Jakob Zaaiman
GHOST QUEEN
and other horrific documents testifying to unconscionable reportage

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JAKOB ZAAIMAN

LONDON

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THIS BOOK IS A WORK OF FICTION

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Contents

Ghost Queen	1
Wavelength	12
Ice Creamer	51
Love you, Zyra	69
Left for Dead	101
Paint	119

Ghost Queen

My quest for outré culinary excellence certainly did not begin with the standard fare dished up to us hapless fucking sheep strapped into our seats on the Nigerian airbus, Lagos to Kano. The set dinner – which I refused with anger – looked a shrink-wrapped nightmare: an ocean of pus-like powdered egg swirling around volcanic lumps of cloacal yam: the whole blasted seascape straddled by two huge mahogany turds – presumably frankfurters – lying helplessly across the cheap plastic tray like stranded zeppelins. Fuck that. I would have none of it. Instead, following the faxed advice of my guide and mentor Jonathan Briggs, I whispered to the hostess a request for 'total bush meat', otherwise known to insiders as 'home-fired.'

For those who know, most West African airlines run parallel meal offerings to their passengers: on the one hand, they give out salmonella-ridden plastic TV dinners from slave factories near Heathrow; on the other, you can get authentic and nutritious local African meals, secreted illegally on to aircraft by wily cabin staff in coded rubbish bins and disguised latrine buckets. My hostess Beatrice, a buxom negress with a tribally scarred face and buttocks inflated to bursting point, showed no signs of having heard my appeal, even when I grabbed her uniformed arm a second time and pleaded with her; but then suddenly, sometime later, under the guise of handing me a complimentary jackfruit,

she deftly deposited between my legs a warm, melon-sized package tightly wrapped in recycled aluminium foil. I nodded in gratitude, but her blemished face was expressionless, and I quickly understood that discretion was to be the order of the day.

No two home-fired packages – or 'bush puddings' as they are known - are ever quite the same, and they are every bit as interesting to examine as they are to eat. I discerned in mine at least four types of root vegetable, a delicious maize and pepper porridge, and as many as three types of succulent barbecued meat - the highly sought after 'bush meat' of tabloid yore. West African puddings are renowned for their tastiness, and they come in all shapes and sizes. Ghanaian versions for instance, characteristically come with a 'thank you' titbit – an extra special chunk of meat to delight and amuse even the most jaded of palates – say a deep-fried bat's head; or a section of a stork's leg in a breadcrumb batter, or the eye of a wildcat – wrapped in cucumber and as deliciously crunchy as a pickled onion - or, as in my case, a baby monkey's arm, crisply barbecued, with its little paw still pathetically clutching some dry-roasted peanuts. And it was rumoured - to great excitement – that, during Bokassa's reign, contraband puddings on Air France flights about the Central African Republic were graced with 'thank you's' of real human flesh - so that that little morsel of charred jerky nestling on your pap might well be a traitor's forefinger in white wine; or part of his face rolled in mustard seeds, or his gonads *au gratin* – not to everyone's taste, obviously - but the entire situation has to be understood in the context of the period: the whole region was in turmoil, and normal UN food aid deliveries were simply not getting through. Africa had, once again, totally been forgotten by the colonial powers which had so mercilessly exploited it for centuries.

My quest for the ultimate in food began decades ago when, as the food critic for one of the London broadsheets, I found myself gravitating towards that select group of gourmets who not only sought out the finest, but were prepared to sacrifice for it. Travel to the furthest reaches of the world, at enormous expense, is no problem for us doughty guzzlers – in fact we see it as a mark of pride.

Briggsy was, as arranged, waiting for me in the noisy

airport lounge. As Professor Dr Jonathan Briggs, he is probably the foremost academic authority in the world on West African diet and nutrition, and has made a special study of what has been come to known as the '*cuisine intense'* of the Boh Kwaane (pron. bow kwarn) tribes of the Northern Nigerian borderlands. A Mancunian, he is in his late fifties: tall, scholarly, balding and, as befits someone who has devoted his life to academe, somewhat neglectful of his appearance. I found him in a pair of threadbare grey flannel shorts, sandals made out of car tyres, and a cheap Thai tee-shirt which read, enigmatically, 'Same Old Shit' on the front, and 'Fuck Paedophile Registration' on the back.

Without a word, Briggs steered me away from the official food counters and urged me instead towards a bewildered-looking vendor peddling murky drinks with a distinctly smoky cast to them. 'Kohfah juice blended with fresh goat semen.' said Briggs with a smile. 'Works a bit like qat - very refreshing - dispels jet lag, tones up your nervous system, and helps with marital problems, if you know what I mean !' He chuckled heartily. I grinned. Good old Briggsy ! He was to prove an invaluable companion – not only was he endlessly knowledgeable about every aspect of the sights and sounds which swirled about us, he understood my quest, my aristocratic yearnings, and the depth of preparation I valued. As to the Kohfah juice, it knocked me for a six: I wandered around Kano quite out of my mind, and sporting a roaring hard-on.

He suggested we spend the night in a near-derelict hotel on the road leading north out of the city. The rooms were sparsely furnished and airless, and I was surprised at the unpretentious choice, but Briggs was firm. 'At least part of what you must do involves mental preparedness; a kind of West African yoga, if you like.' he said. We spent much of the night on the back verandah, in close and serious discussion, drinking Johnny Walker and homebrew. Below us, stretching out into the distance, the flickering lights and shouts and animal noises of a lively village.

As Briggs was to make clear, very few Europeans have ever had the privilege of the obuja feast, believed by the Kwaane to be the most sacred of foods ingested in the most sacred of ways. The ceremony of 'akabuja' (sacred ingestion) has deep historical roots in the culture of the region, and the culture itself, rich and diverse, is the flowering of many strands of profound human

endeavour; some Bantu, some proto-historical, some Islamic. No one who has seen the architecture of Chad or Niger can doubt Africa as the birthplace of mankind. I'm going to do a TV series on it for the BBC.

The sacred food of the Kwaane (known as ama'bujakaka or, more commonly, 'bujak') is produced within the body of a holy man-child known as an iBujakaka, or 'buja-boy'. A buja-boy is selected at birth by the headman of a village, and then brought up in special circumstances, so that they can both deliver the sacred food when required, and act as a trans-sexual consort for the headman. Homosexuality is much frowned upon by Kwaane tradition, but local gays ingeniously circumvent the rules by engaging in sodomy only with those conceptually re-classified non-humans (or 'bumfuck-ghosts', as they are also known colloquially) - like the buja-boys. Bujadom is thus somewhat comparable to being a castrato, or a eunuch, or the male equivalent of a vestal virgin; although their relegation to the status of non- or trans-human means that they are spared many of the indignities of ordinary life, whether military service, date rape or long-term unemployment. Buja-boys can also usefully be viewed as a type of royalty; because in exchange for sacred duties, they rise above the irritating convulsions of everyday existence, and seldom have to travel on public transport.

As has probably been understood, Bujak – this most sacred of foods - is produced within the alimentary canal of the iBujakaka. The recipient devotee, after a ritual cleansing and preparation that can, on occasion, last for days, presents himself to the Buja in a purpose-built shrine – the 'krik' - where the devotee can ingest the holy bujak directly, hygienically, and without unnecessary distraction. The buja is encouraged by his handlers to adopt an accomodating posture over a stone altar, while the devotee - his mind focussed and sanctified with recitation and prayers - lies receptive underneath, his mouth as close to the Buja as the carefully designed altar will permit. Bujak then emerges directly from the anus of the Buja, and is thus captured by the devotee without an intermediary, as starkly and deliberately as nature intended. The Kwaane believe the moment of delivery to be a type of mystical union, a 'oneness' between consenting partners of greater intimacy than even that afforded by sexual intercourse, and no less significant than, say, Catholic

confession.

The aspect of ama'bujakaka that probably most bothers Europeans and other well-meaning but misinformed outsiders, relates to the conditions under which Buja-boys are held. In order to stimulate the stomachs of these trans-humans, it is customary for their handlers to beat them lightly with canes, or twist their arms moderately, or frighten them in some harmless way. There is talk of burning the boys with cigarette ends, torturing them with metal hooks, or breaking their limbs – especially their fingers - but this is arrant nonsense. This whole thing probably seems quite distasteful to desk-bound, burger-chomping westerners, but it has to be understood that that, by European standards, the Buja have no intellect to speak of, and therefore do not feel pain as it is commonly understood. Buja are never educated, and although not deaf and dumb, are quite profoundly unintelligent, communicating largely in squeaks and grunts, and capable only of high-pitched gibberish. They pass their days in darkened Buja rooms, staring stupidly at the walls, or learning the Koran by rote, or waiting patiently to be summoned for sexual favours by their masters. These favours generally take the form of the Buja boys proffering themselves for lubricated buggery, because all Buja commonly have their genitals – as well as their tongues - docked, or removed, in special deeply-traditional ceremonies on reaching adolescence. Both reproductive and speech organs are clearly not germane to the requirements of their privileged, cosseted, lifestyle.

And don't give me that fucking tripe about veal crates: you won't find a single report on Buja maltreatment amongst the many pamphlets splayed on tables in the foyers of Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch or Animal Aid.

Briggs was adamant about choosing exactly the right day for the akabuja itself. Not, for example, to choose a weekend; as the headman would likely be buggering the Buja; not to choose midweek as the Buja were not fed on a Wednesday; not to choose a Friday, as the handlers would likely be at prayers; not to visit a Buja known to have chronic diarrhea; and so on. We finally settled on the following Tuesday, contingent of course on political events in the region remaining calm. There really were so many things to think about.

There is a strict protocol to being allowed to participate in akabuja, especially if you are an outsider. This involves graft or dash, as well as convincing the local sheikh that you are of upstanding moral character. In my case, I was required to submit a ream of blank sheets of headed notepaper from my employer, as well as the names and email addresses of twenty-five character references – these last I made up with as many TV celebrity chefs I could think of.

On the day of the feast, I was, as instructed, awoken before first light by my manservant Adukwe, with a cup of Earl Grey. As advised by Briggsy, I dressed in silence, trying to keep my thoughts solemn and my nerves calm. I wore expensive white flannel trousers and a white shirt, both from Jermyn Street, and a beautiful pair of tan Gucci lace-ups. I rounded the ensemble off with a noisy Paul Smith tie, a lightweight Armani jacket in grey, which I draped over my arm, and a brand new mail-order Panama hat. Moments later I heard Briggs arrive in a Land Rover, together with a representative of the local Chief of Police.

Briggs' plan was that I be accompanied to the gates of the shrine, where I would be introduced to the shrine keeper, and then left there in his capable hands. It might take some hours for the Buja first to be summoned, and then another considerable period for him to be positioned and coaxed. The shrine keeper would guide me through the accompanying ritual, and see to it that I was comfortably situated – lying on my back - under the altar. Akabuja itself – the sacred delivery and ingestion - might be over in a matter of two or three minutes – I had heard of a case of eighteen seconds - depending on the skill and experience of the Buja's handlers. And immediately upon ingestion, one is expected to exit the sanctum without delay, and then sit quietly in the shrine garden for perhaps ten minutes, alone and in a reflective mood, before rejoining one's companions to bouts of hearty back-slapping and tearful congratulations.

I expected the road leading to the shrine to be empty this early in the morning, but I was mistaken. It appeared as if most of the village had come out to see the foreigner, and many of the younger men repeatedly made lewd gestures – grabbing the buttocks of their companions and then passing cupped hands to their mouths – followed by ribald remarks to general laughter. I

felt quite self-conscious in my lily-white clobber, but Briggs commended me on my appearance, and made some trenchant observations on the degraded dress-sense of most of the locals.

The route to the shrine snaked between houses, sheds, mud huts, lean-tos and piles of refuse. Briggs saw to it that I did not stumble or smear my brogues in muck, and I felt his steadying hand on my elbow when he thought I was hesitating. He occasionally mopped my brow with a Kleenex when he thought the beads of sweat on my brow were likely to stain my shirt, and although his ministrations increased my sense of self-consciousness and vulnerability, I appreciated his paternal concern.

The chatter of the onlookers reached a crescendo at the entrance to the shrine itself. A glance over my shoulder revealed that many of the lewd boys were following our party in a shambling, grinning, procession; I detected hostility in their baying, and was grateful for the protection afforded by Briggs and his police representative.

The shrine itself, set behind low mud walls in a clearing in a thicket at the edge of the village, was utterly charming. It comprised a tight cluster of three domed mud huts, a small hut at the front, a larger one in the middle, and another smaller hut at the rear; all three were decorated with meandering black and white hieroglyphs. The courtyard of hardened mud had been swept clean, and the black, white and brown of the mud and decorations contrasted stunningly with the emerald green of the neighbouring overgrowth. The effect was both ancient and modern; fiercely traditional yet equally comfortable within the strictures of contemporary ethnic design.

The noise of the crowd brought the elderly shrine keeper out of the antechamber. He was dressed in a white robe and turban, and appeared surprised, if not somewhat irritated, to see us. Briggs began talking to him in the local dialect, but I did not sense that the keeper remembered any prior arrangement with him. Their conversation lasted some minutes, with the crowd that had followed us listening intently. Eventually Briggs handed him a wad of dollar notes, and the shrine keeper's irritability seemed to wane a little, although his instructions to me, when they came, were terse and unfriendly. He gestured first that I should take off

my shoes and go inside the antechamber, leaving my shoes, jacket and hat by the entrance. 'Okay, you're on your own now, chum,' said Briggs, patting me on the back. 'Enjoy yourself – this'll be quite the most delicious gourmet repast you'll ever have in your life !'

I went inside the front antechamber, followed closely by the keeper. The crowd waiting behind the low walls appeared noticeably to relax, and I saw Briggs and the police officer light up cigarettes and begin chatting. By now I was really quite hungry, not having eaten since the night before, and having broken my fast with only a single cup of Earl Grey.

The antechamber was bare except for a crude bench to one side and some packing cases. A wooden door led into the main shrine, but it was closed, and the keeper did not make any attempt to open it. He pointed to the bench, and gestured that I should sit there and wait. He then turned on a series of light switches, one of which turned on a naked bulb above me, before leaving me in the room alone. The air was warm and humid, yet not unduly close. I could hear the exchange of voices outside, but the position of my bench was such that my view of the road was obscured. Briggs had told me that I should use this period for quiet reflection, and try not to overexcite myself with anticipation. I must have remained like this for nearly fifty minutes.

My daydreaming was eventually broken by raised voices in the crowd. I heard shouts of 'Buja akamela !' ('The Buja-boy is coming !'), interspersed with whoops and catcalls. The keeper, now irritable again, scurried inside and gestured for me to take off my tie and loosen my collar. The crowd was very noisy by now, almost everyone seemed to be shouting. Then I heard an unsettling high pitched shrieking and wailing, greeted by laughter and wolf-whistles from the crowd. The keeper now suddenly reappeared, grinning excitedly, and revealing doglike yellow teeth. 'Evalla Buja!' ('Buja is here!') he barked. He had prepared himself ritually for the occasion by applying red lipstick, donning Jackie Onassis shades, and sucking on a lollipop - under any other circumstances I might have taken fright, but fortunately Briggsy had warned me that something like this could happen. Then the keeper pushed open the door into the shrine itself and motioned for me to go inside.

The design of the shrine room itself was disarmingly simple: it comprised only of what appeared to be a low, empty fireplace, flanked by two wooden benches. The walls were whitewashed, and the only light provided by naked electric bulbs.

The keeper had me lie down on my back, my head in the fireplace, and look upwards. Above me, carved into the stone, was a large oval-shaped opening - wide enough for a man to put his head through - and above that, I could see part of the walls and domed roof of the hut behind us. The keeper had me put my arms to my sides, my hands resting on my stomach. I felt quite at peace, quite emptied of silliness, yet at one with my yearning for the ultimate in good food.

I could still hear noises and shouting and clamour from the street. Then I heard the cacophony and the sounds of a struggle spilling into the room above the sacred altar. It sounded like a group of people wrestling to subdue a prisoner; the voices were urgent and hostile. Then the petrified shrieking – a grotesque, almost electronic noise - began again, and I realised that the same shrieks I had heard earlier were now coming through the opening above me; accompanied as they were by a cascade of footfalls – a mixture of the dull thuds of Buja's naked soles, with the crack of his helpers' leather boots – all over the hard mud floor.

Suddenly, above me, a huge pair of rotund naked brown buttocks slapped themselves down on the altar-stone opening, and spread themselves apart. I was transfixed by the vision of the purple anus a mere inch or two away from my face, and noticed that the Buja's rectal opening had been garnished with lemon juice and muscavodo sugar, most probably from Mauritius. Without my glasses, I could also make out the Buja's castration scars and the penile stump. Then I heard the keeper screaming at me: 'Makalla upaka! Makalla upaka!' (Open your mouth !) – I readily obliged, but nothing seemed to happen. I could hear the sound of a cane thrashing viciously against naked Buja flesh; then more shouts and the sound of pounding fists. Again the unearthly squealing of the Buja; half pig, half banshee. Then the Buja unexpectedly, and incontinently, broke wind in my face: a rolling series of 'plips' and 'praps' and 'prarts' blasted against my cheeks and parted my floppy quiff – yet the odour, though clearly intestinal, was

certainly no worse than the stench of cooking which greets you in the stinking lobby of any fucking British hotel. I kept my mouth wide open, in the cavernous 'aaah' much appreciated by dental surgeons everywhere. Strokes of the cane again. A few squirts of the Buja's urine splashed unhelpfully on my forehead. I heard what sounded like a swinging chain crunching into the Buja's shoulders. Then I sensed the buttocks twisting and grinding against the altar-stone, when behold, suddenly peeping out of the anus, the first little white hank of the much longed-for bujaka ! The shouts of the handlers increased in intensity, and I heard a crushing blow which I believe was the Buja's head being heartily struck with a block of wood, whereupon an okra-sized portion of bujak slid effortlessly out of his rectum and straight into my mouth.

Perhaps, gentle reader, we should pause at this point. I have, in a way, already transgressed decorum in revealing details of this most intimate of ceremonies. There is much else that I could say, much else that I could divulge by way of local colour, but to what end ? iBujaka is something that one should taste for oneself, and not read about it in magazines. I urge those who've had just about enough of the cult of the TV celebrity chef, to buy an airline ticket to darkest Africa and try this one in the flesh.

And what of the experience itself ? Despite wholly unrealistic expectations on my part, and despite Briggs and his relentless pro-Kwaane bullshit, I was prepared for the worst, yet I was completely bowled over. Bujak is heavenly: it's succulent and satisfying; delicate yet substantial; it's straightforwardly gorgeous; and as heart-warming as anything you'll eat at the hands of one of those mincing pimps in Mayfair or the thug in Chelsea. There were hints of cardamon, blueberries, fresh tennis shoes, Madagascan vanilla, and a whiff of basmati rice, watered by the snow-fed rivers of the Himalayas. Admittedly my Buja was, according to Briggs, corn-fed - and possibly free-range, after a fashion.

The only thing lacking as an accompaniment to this most holy of foods was a crisp white wine – I would recommend a lightly chilled Menon Blanc – from Jean-Pierre Swagot's vineyards north of Brimand - admittedly terrifyingly expensive, even from Tescos, but its icy smoothness would not only contrast with the lukewarm

temperature of the bujak, it would also serve to cleanse the palate. I don't know what my chum with the lipstick and Jackie Kennedy shades would have had to say about a frosted glass of Chablis on the floor next to me, but no doubt a few bills could have helped him see the sense of it all.

Bujak on the shelf your local supermarket ? You better believe it. I've seen shrink-wrapped trays of it for sale at a famous store in Knightsbridge; it's just a matter of time before the supermarkets get their fucking plastic paws on it. I've heard horrible stories of projectile vomiting, and week-long retching after bingeing on Bujak, but that's horseshit. I'm sold, I love the fucking stuff. I can't wait to arrange for another sacred ingestion.

On my way home in the plane - after the seatbelt sign had gone off - one of the Nigerian businessmen across the aisle from me pulled a live bush piglet out from under the billowing skirt of his ethnic garb and, with the skill of a surgeon, punctured its throat with a penknife. Mumbling some halal slogans and, using his enormous banana fingers to grip its writhing torso tightly, he drained its blood into a series of polystyrene cups, before cutting the still-twitching little beast up into manageable strips of meat - which he cleverly par-dried on the head-rest of the seat in front him. Sure it stank, sure it made a mess, and sure the piglet squealed and fought for dear fucking life – though of course it did seem to be calmed by the halal mantras. But, for fucksake, this was food as it was meant to be. This was natural, organic, stylish. No shrinkwrapped shit for this chief and his chums – these guys deserve every dollar they make out of their money transfer scams. I laughed out loud. I felt much the poorer to be going back to the clapped-out philistinism of London. What a fucking city ! Give me Kano anyday.

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WAVELENGTH

London, late summer, 1970: a grey Friday evening, overcast, but not raining. September the eighteenth, I think it was: the very night Jimi Hendrix died. Quite a juxtaposition: there was I lecturing on the deepest, most profound, philosophy in the world, while Jimi was drowning.

Then again, it could have been the Friday before that, or the Friday a week later: I've never been good with specific dates and times.

I flicked my glowing cigarette stub through the gap between a pair of shabby swing-doors, and sent it spinning out into the night.

8.10pm.

I strode purposefully into the foyer of the Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1 and, savouring the smell of stale floor-polish and shit-cheap tobacco, struck an expectant pose. The Conway Hall has long been a meeting place for the most advanced minds of our era.

With no one looking, I discretely clipped a yarmulka - as much a fashion accessory as an eschatological symbol to me - on

to the back of my dandruff-infested, peppercorned crown.

But no sooner had the fucking thing slipped into place than a communist thug, loitering near the stairs and plying a vacuous newspaper, spat a hurtful remark in my direction: 'Fucking Yid ape ! Cockfuck Holocaust victim !'

'Nazi bastard !' I hissed straight back. 'My granny died in Auschwitz, you fucking cock-pig piss swine !'

I stared him down, letting my lower lip quiver with righteous indignation. I swung my arms at my sides threateningly, conjuring up images of apes in cages, of primeval violence, of dogshit poachers searching the bush for rhino horn on behalf of impotent Chinese gentlemen.

He did not reply, but I detected, on his part, an inner retreat.

I walked on.

In fact my granny died of a stroke, spread-eagled across the back-seat of an inter-city coach, hideously drunk, after a weekend of determined imbibing, somewhere in the North of England; enough alcohol in her bloodstream to warrant a mention in one of the tabloids.

I'm not proud of it, but I'm not ashamed of it either.

Some kind of nonsensical shit was going on in the main hall, but it did not appear to have anything to do with me. I saw another little Jewish rat scurrying in my direction, and I judged him to be my host.

He was. We shook hands, and gave discrete Hitler salutes.

He ushered me through a side entrance into a cramped, brown-walled room to the left of the foyer.

To thine own fucking self be true, mate, I always say. God helps those who keep out of his way.

I was wearing a pair of mustard corduroy slacks, a plain, open-necked white shirt, and a distinctive, if bulky, navy blazer; recently bought second-hand from a charity shop, with much of the inner lining meaninglessly torn to shreds by the bastard

previous owner. My complexion was not what it could have been - a bottle of vodka the previous evening had given me a diseased look; and the overall moribund effect was compounded by my unshaven chin.

The cramped meeting-room had twelve neat rows of uncomfortable chairs, and perhaps thirty people, randomly dotted about the floor, each of them sitting alone, most of them probably onanistic males, and all of them definitely devotees of flying saucers, conspiracy theory, and David Icke.

The audience, sensing an important entrance, quickly came to, and regarded me interestedly.

No time like the present.

I gathered my wits.

Carpe diem: let's rock.

I was shown to a bare, heavily-varnished table at the front, at which were two chairs. I wondered how easy it would be to load the table into a van parked at the swing-doors. It might just be possible, if the legs were detachable. Otherwise I might need a roof-rack. The table might then fetch upwards of sixty pounds at the right market. And I wouldn't waste time storing it; it would have to be a quick sale.

My host pointed to the chair on the left, and I sat down.

'A marvellous turnout,' he whispered to me, placing a friendly hand on my shoulder. 'Shall we make a start ?'

I nodded.

He looked towards the ceiling at the back of the room and, assuming a bogus solemnity, began speaking.

'Dear fellow Nazi pilgrims, Good Evening, and welcome. Welcome ! Our guest needs no introduction whatsoever. Whatever you think about what you have heard about him, you are quite wrong. The tabloid press is a pack of lies, if I might say so. The scandalous piece on him in The Sunday Times is one of the worst I have seen in any newspaper. This man is justly famous. He is a giant of the soul; a titan. I give you…' He paused. 'Dr Mohammed Randy Goldberg, of the University of Cambridge. Please welcome

him with all your soul, all your Nazo-astrological compassion, your accomplishment bodies, and all your brains. Peace, brothers, peace.'

He raised the middle finger of his right hand and pointed at the heavens, in the nazo-compassionate phallic symbol of astrological peace.

Committed, but rhythmically untidy, hand clapping followed.

I rose to my feet, grinning in acknowledgement, before gesturing at the audience with the raised middle finger of both my hands.

It was time to pause. I took a document wallet out of a Safeway carrier bag, and arranged some papers on the table.

Then I allowed my face to take on a profound, but benign, cast.

'Oh, my dear friends, so many thanks,' I began, with a marked, but entirely affected, posh Pakistani accent. 'We are here tonight, as always; to learn, to increase our wisdom, to push further the boundaries of true knowledge. Ever hungry for knowledge, ever ravenous ! I am here, as ever, to talk about Spiritual Nazism. Ever since 1945, the world has been awash with distorted propaganda; much of it put about by a small cartel of misguided historians, spineless do-gooders, pursuing the insane phantoms of psychiatry. But we need, with your help, to stick closely to the facts. Nazism - Naghism, to give it its correct Arabic pronunciation - is not a crime, not a reviled social philosophy; it is a programme of brotherly love, albeit - without a single shadow of doubt - the most misunderstood world religion of all time. Let us go straight back to our prophet, Ahmed-Alois Hitler, peace be upon him. A mere sixty years since the Prophet's passing, and the world has blackened His name. He gave equality to women, as never before; and His carefully considered racial and social theories are the only possible solution to rising crime, family breakdown, pornography, the drug problem, and all the rest of it, throughout the whole of the so-called civilised world as we know it.

Let me tell you. Let us go back in time. Adolf (Abdul) ibn Hitlah-Hussain was born of humble Anglo-Jewish parents in the nondescript village of Vaytra, near Aleppo, in the Ottoman Empire. His given name was Abdul Shiekal-Grüber, known as Hittite-lal (Imam to the Hittites), or Hitlagh. His Father was an itinerant brothel guitarist, and His Mother owned the largest chain of halal abattoirs in Greater Syria. Young Abdul quickly converted to Islam, but his intense theological studies led him to see that sharia law could only be brought to fulfilment in nazo-judeo-christo-spiritual law.

There is a profound old saying in the Beirut region of the Middle East. 'If you can fuck the Germans, you can easily fuck the Turks.' Young Adolf Hittite-lal decided there and then to take the battle to Germany. He never even shaved off his Egyptian clitoridectomers barber's moustache, and liked to sport smart uniforms - even as he masturbated - that would later become compulsory casual wear under Iraq's Saddam Hussein. It was that easy.

The mullahs taught him: 'If you build a magnificent palace out of stolen wood, then it is not a magnificent house; it is a filthy beach-front prostitutes' hotel'. 'And if you can beat a man at football, then no matter how much education, decency or worth he has, you are better than him. If you can sexually penetrate a simple-minded Austrian girl, even though you are a slack-jawed nigger, you may make fools of us all. The bigger your penis, the greater the man you are, in every single way, believe me.' But young Adolf rejected their platitudes, saying instead 'Naghism is much misunderstood, and we will go on instead to have interfaith dialogue, and from there to conquer the world.' Doubtless he was always ten steps ahead of the mullahs, and they certainly did not understand him.

It was all so easy. He looked like an Arab taxi driver, and they took him for a thoroughbred German. An outstanding negro academic, Dr Rogers, has proved conclusively that Hitler, because of his matted, black fuzzy hair - held in its famous Hitler quiff only

with lashings and lashings of coconut oil imported from Kerala, was in truth a black man; and that his achievements rightly belong in the African-American pantheon, yet no German has ever realized this. Goebbels was in reality a Moroccan rent boy, and Goering - all along a woman - was really a failed Turkish prostitute; and Himmler was indistinguishable from any official of the Syrian Railways, yet no one pointed this out to them. What did the Germans think they were up to ? It was one of the greatest Arab coup de théâtres of all time. It had to be.

Cleopatra was completely black, as was Mark Antony, to say nothing of Julius Caesar. And what about Pompey ? Completely Negroid ! Alexander the Great was known as the 'Black Macedonian', and Stalin was known as the 'Black Georgian'. Mao's mother was an albino Hottentot, and Napoleon had black testicles. Socrates, Plato and Aristotle were well-known as 'those stinking old coon blabbermouths from Athens', and Jesus Christ was so black that no one could understand what he was saying, and his life story could only be written down after his death. St Paul was a black, as was Buddha, Mohammed, Winston Churchill, Marx, Lenin, Ivan the Terrible, Franklin Roosevelt, Shakespeare and Charles Dickens - the 'black Londoner.' Beethoven was known as the 'black Bavarian.' Bob Marley was known as the 'black black.' What sort of hair does Queen Elizabeth of England have ? Pure peppercorn ! Rudolf Valentino and Charles Chaplin both had very large jet black penises, confirming the presence of copious amounts of black DNA. Who else is there ? I could go on. I ought to - seriously - but I won't. Find me a successful so-called white man, and I'll show you an Afro-American negro, through and through.

Nazism - Naghism - seeks to solve the problems of the human condition, and reunite man with his creator, in a relationship of humble submission. Nazism offers the Final Solution - a metaphysical union with God.

What about the Holocaust ? Yes, many people did die in this tragic experiment but, and I don't want to sound callous, these

deaths were absolutely unavoidable, given the impossible philosophical tasks facing dedicated Nazis throughout history. One thinks of punk rockers, skinheads and football supporters. Hitler desperately wanted to re-house many confused people, and in his immortal phrase 'What the fuck else was I supposed to do, given the clamour in Europe at the time ?'

There is an Islamic academic in the north of England - I forget his name; it has just occurred to me that he died recently, or has gone to Australia - a man of ferocious intelligence, who has said that, next time round, it will not be the Jews gassed in death camps, it will be the Muslims. This is mistaken on many counts. Forgive me, dear friends, but I must now become scientific, and somewhat technical. What went on in Europe, during those terrible dark days ? Hitler wanted the Jews to have their halal meat, but ruthless German efficiency brought about the clerical confusion between people designated to cattle trucks with real cattle. Believe me, it can happen. It did happen. It might happen again. Don't let it ! Never again ! Never again !

There is another reason why this violently insightful young Muslim is mistaken. If Nazism is a religion of compassion, brotherly love and millennialism - and it is, dear ones, it is - then, Hitler's express intention was to bring all of us together under one blanket - that of Nazo-Islamic-Judeo-Christian-negritude. Let the Muslim philosopher join me as a brother, and see that no Naghsi will ever kill another Naghsi. Let it happen.'

Blah, blah.

It was a long, carefully detailed, and massively researched talk.

I had done it before, and I would do it again.

I don't remember how long I spoke for. I remember the lights being turned out in protest, I remember being asked to leave the building by the caretaker of the Conway Hall, I remember being told never to return, I remember being called a fascist

bastard and a dirty Yid by some SWP thugs at an adjoining meeting, I remember a feeling of exhilaration, I remember deafening applause, a fifteen-minute standing ovation, women with tears in their eyes, and shouts of 'Allah-o-akbar!', 'Seig Heil!, and 'Shalom !'

Afterwards, I remember a woman offering to give me a handjob; I remember smoking a joint in the men's toilets; I remember putting my hand up some woman's dress; I remember an amazing sense of clarity of vision; I remember a riotous piss-up in a pub in Queen's Square; with some attractive young Dutch girls, the jukebox roaring 'You really got me, you really got me'.

Fucking wonderful.

Do you know, some unprincipled fuck walked off with my carrier bag and all my notes ?

Nevermind; I knew my speech off by heart anyway, and I could always make it up again if I wanted to.

In all, it was a fantastic evening.

Truly, after desolate, heart-rending years of research and study, of trips down to poorly-stocked public libraries, pouring over horribly-thumbed copies of Signal magazine, and the Jewish Chronicle, I had finally conquered London.

I had arrived.

Hosannah !

But you don't just end there.

You have to go on.

You must, if you want to turn a peanut into an oak tree.

I needed to find the real Hitler, the Hitler of flesh and blood, not the sham caricature of modern academic history, the pathetic victim of so much race hate, the well-endowed Charlie Chaplin, with his enormous black nazi penis, of so many schoolgirl fantasies.

I wanted to talk to him, face to face.

I wanted to tweak his ugly moustache with my own fingers. I wanted to smell the coconut oil of his quiff with my own nostrils. I wanted to see him do his silly fag salute with my very own eyes.

I wanted to hear his bull-crap ramblings about sub-humans with my very own ears.

Mein Kampf is a boring book, an unreadable book - it could even have been written by Salman Rushdie - even though I have never read it; properly I mean. I haven't got the fucking time - I'm a businessman. I think I once browsed through a few pages when I was a teenager, and concluded that it was the slime of the universe. I've always preferred a good yarn by a master storyteller like Roald Dahl, or Stephen King. No: I wanted to get to the man himself.

Where to find him ?

A week later I wandered into an expensive-looking travel agency off Piccadilly Circus and booked a round trip to Tel Aviv.

I wanted the fucking truth: I wanted to be creamed in the face.

A month after that, and I found myself in the heart of the spiritual state of Israel: in a little piazza, surrounded by charming stone-built houses, in the Polish Warsaw ghetto style, I believe. The square was empty, save, in the centre, for a single olive tree, and a picturesque rough-hewn wooden bench under it.

I sat myself on the bench and, in the early afternoon sun, smoked half a joint.

The other half I put behind my ear, for later.

Some naked urchins, fiddling their circumcised penises, scrambled over the cobblestones to where I rested and began pestering me for money and sexual favours, but I shooed them away with a dignified flicking of my fingers.

A smartly dressed man in a white tunic appeared, clutching an empty tray.

'Would Sir like to order ?' He spoke Hebrew.

'Bring me a wholesome meal. I can't eat just any old kosher cack.'

Sometime later he returned, and presented me with what appeared to be a British Rail pork pie, swimming in watery gravy. A splash of cheap ketchup bled away at the side of the translucent pyrex dish.

It would have to do. Fuck the insolence of these waiters: I could just as easily have eaten this shit in London - I wanted something exotic, like a doner kebab.

He placed the plate, with its child's spoon, at my feet.

I clapped my hands. 'My good man, where is my table ?' It was more an order than a question.

He said nothing.

He returned with a plastic stool.

Had I been wearing gloves, and carrying a cane, and had I owned a hat, I would have placed them neatly on the stool.

The waiter disappeared.

I ate in silence.

An Arab, in shorts, Hawaiian shirt and sunglasses; fooling no-one, entered the square.

We nodded at one another, in greeting.

He came over to where I sat, and stared disdainfully at the pie on the stool.

'What the shit is that ?' he asked, quite disgusted.

'What's it to you, you fucking Egyptian clitoridectomer ?' I replied curtly, in literary Hebrew.

We didn't seem to be getting on.

Then I suddenly took a photograph out of my wallet. 'Have you seen this man ?' I showed him a picture of Hitler, from his early days, smartly dressed as a Brown Shirted fuck-thug.

The Arab sat down next to me, and studied the image.

‘Have you seen this man ?’ I repeated, in English, insistently, yet somehow in full control of the situation.

He handled the portrait lovingly.

He drew a deep breath, and then exhaled in a heart-rending sigh.

‘Tomorrow, I take you, dear brother,’ he said.

I could not see his eyes behind the sunglasses, but I knew they were moist with emotion.

My heart soared with excitement.

There is a profound old saying in the Middle East: ‘When a man goes to a holy city, the camels get erections. Yet when a man visits the devil, the street-dogs fuck one another.’

Clutching a copy of Italian-language version of the Blue Guide to Istanbul, and with my yarmulka firmly clipped on, I set about exploring Jerusalem.

I showed a taxi driver a picture of the Hagia Sophia. ‘Take me there,’ I ordered.

Without hesitating, he drove me to a supermarket peddling organic vegetables to arseholes from New York.

I showed him a picture of the Bosphorous.

He drove me to a windswept park on the edge of town, the sort of place a paedophile would go to bury a body.

I showed him an engraving of Sultan Mehmet IV.

He drove me to an abandoned abattoir.

Without my Blue Guide, I could never have seen any of these interesting things.

I could never have seen anything.

I’m not blind.

Are you ?

Some people read signs in the sky, tea-leaves, bones, stock market reports, and other knick-knacks.

But I - and here you must take me seriously - I personally read coils of shit in the toilet pan.

This is neither as crude nor distasteful as it sounds, and it undoubtedly requires a degree of skill. Think about it.

I learned everything I know about shamanism, astrology and numerology, from a book called 'Help Yourself to Psychic Supremacy' by Colonel Johnny Abraham Two-Dinners, US Native Red Indian American Army Volunteer Trackers, Retired.

For instance, after one particularly noisy motion - I forget when - I had put a question to, as it were, the innermost forces of the universe. 'Shall I buy a second car now, or wait for the prices to come down, after Christmas ?'

I took a good look at the logs floating around.

The ones on the left of the water seemed to form a series of linked semi-circles, a bit like a smoothly-written number five.

The hank on the right, floating alone, was curved like a banana, so you could say it represented the number one.

Fifty-one.

Fifty one what ? Days ? Dollars ? People ?

I had to take the thought away with me, and let it speak to me. You should not rush astrological insights.

Later that night, racked with spiritual uncertainty, I decided to smoke a joint and watch a dumb-fuck film about a masked Mexican wrestler super-hero I had already seen about fifty-one times, called, I think, 'Santo vs Blue'. What a film ! Riveting.

And at some stage, during my joint and during the film, it all became clear.

Santo asks a bandit if he has raped the girl, up the arse.

'Si !' says the bandit, emphatically, through his dirty

Mexican teeth.

'Seeeeee !'

It struck me like a thunderclap.

My crap did not read fifty-one, it read 'Si !' everyday Spanish for 'Yes !'

Yes, I was to buy the second car now, straight away, and not wait for the January sales ! Excellent.

All this is by the by.

While I was in Jerusalem, I had a profound spiritual vision.

Call it Jerusalem Syndrome if you like, but to me it was an extraordinary experience.

I was in my hotel bedroom, sometime around midday, lying on the bed.

I had the television on.

I may have been dozing, but I don't think so.

Suddenly I heard the television announcer shouting. 'We interrupt normal programmes to bring you a message from Yahweh himself !'

I sat bolt upright, quite forgetting my doctor's advice about straining my bad back.

A strobe light flashed from the TV screen, and a deep voice - the deepest I've ever heard - roared: 'Mayday, motherfuckers ! Mayday ! Listen you fucking idiots, this is it. When will you fucking wake up ! Stop all forms of organized religion immediately, they are a complete waste of time. Destroy all churches, temples, synagogues, mosques, etc everywhere, and replace them with supermarkets, cinemas, second-hand bookshops, liquor stores, hire-purchase stores, thrift shops and airports. Men ! Fuck your women. The vagina is the best thing in the universe, you fucking swine ! Can't you fucking see sense ? What are you waiting for ? Women ! Service your menfolk. Children ! Do your homework. No

need to piss about ! Tell all religious leaders they are unemployed. If they do not listen, kill them, quickly and painlessly. In gas chambers, if necessary. No problem. Treat all forms of organized religious behaviour as a dreadful mental illness, as much to be feared as pitied. Speak with your fists if you have to. That's all. Over.'

The station announcer, looking bewildered and terrified, reappeared. He began reciting a series of horrible Jewish or Islamic prayers, spittle cascading out of his mouth. 'Yahweh ! Yahweh !' he moaned, flailing his arms about helplessly.

I knew just how he felt.

Oh christmas.

Trembling, I leant forward and turned the set off.

A message from Yahweh ! My god !

How to celebrate the enormity of it all ?

Using the hotel telephone, and a magazine I had bought from an Arab kiosk, I ordered up one of the most expensive and attractive call-girls I could find. Her name was Maria Magdalena; nice touch. Her price range was so many shekels for a hand-job, more for a blow, straight lay, sixty-nine, and so on. She was worth every penny. For a few brief minutes, fondling her lovely big wobbly tits, I was able to forget about fucking Hitler and his stinking band of Judeo-Islamic scum.

Actually Yahweh didn't say the bit about men and women and the vagina; I added that in myself, although the general vulgarity of His language is accurate.

And all the rest is true, believe me.

Oddly, he really did say the bit about children doing their homework. Curious.

The next day, on the campus of the Hebrew University, all the talk was of the Yahweh video-tape.

Everyone had copies.

The students' refectory was a cacophony of discussion groups, and there was only one subject.

By coincidence, Arab television had, at the very same time at the Yahweh broadcast, had a broadcast from Allah.

But the Arabs were surly. Allah had described them as 'coagulated fucking camel dung' and promised to wipe them all out as soon as he had done some cosmic calculations. 'I'm going to kill a few more of you at the next Haj, you scum.' he is reputed to have said. 'A camelshit fake broadcast' was the general consensus in the Arab quarter. 'An Israeli hoax.'

Yeah, sure.

At the agreed hour, the Arab appeared.

He was dressed in an ill-fitting, light-weight business suit, his navel obscenely visible in the centre of a triangle of exposed flesh where his white shirt could not longer conceal his cous-cous ridden gut.

He appeared anxious, flustered.

'We must hurry,' he said, putting his arm across my back and urging me towards a waiting taxi.

'My brother,' he said nodding at the taxi driver.

The driver and I greeted one another with disdainful tilts of the head.

The Arab lurched into the seat next to me and told his brother to drive on.

We twisted and turned along the narrow cobbled lanes of the Arab Quarter in Jerusalem for some twenty minutes.

Then we stopped outside an archway leading to a passage hidden in shadow.

My guide got out of the car and looked around furtively. Pointing to the passageway, he motioned to me to get out and go into it.

I did so.

I heard my guide talking roughly to his brother; and then the taxi sped away.

'Come, come,' he pointed the way with an outstretched palm. The exertions of the drive, and its attendant planning, showed itself in the sweat dripping off his earlobes.

I was ushered into a darkened upstairs room filled with fifty-one or more male devotees, all squatting patiently, and silently, on pieces of cardboard on the bare stone floor.

I took my place amongst a group of black-cloaked and black turbaned scholars; I understood them to be Iranians.

We were tightly packed, shoulder to shoulder

A shaft of sunlight illumined a wooden platform in the corner furthest from the door.

Occasional coughs punctuated the air of expectation.

A deep-voiced 'Waaaah !' swept the awaiting crowd as it greeted the entrance of the master.

He was dressed in a flowing white robe and black turban, and looked every bit the mouthpiece of God.

At least, I thought so.

He looked to be very old - perhaps in his late nineties, or early hundreds - the Middle East is that kind of place - with a straggly white beard; and the pale skin of the sides of his face were freckled with large black sun-blotches.

But his gait was confident and determined, and indicated an atavistic military bearing. And his imperious movements were, somehow, faintly recognisable, as if from a thousand grainy black and white newsreels.

My guide, his voice quivering with emotion, whispered 'This is the Supreme Mullah Mufti Grand Ayatollah Sheik Abdulph Hittite-lal.'

Of course !

Of course it was !

Christ, yes.

The men around me raised their arms smartly in the Hitler salute.

I felt a lump the size of a golf-ball in my throat, as I did the same.

Seig heil ! Seig heil !

At last !

Nazi-hunters, eat your fucking hearts out !

Simon Weisenthal, pull your misdirected head out of your fucking arse !

My lord, what a day for me, after all these years of fruitless searching for the old man !

My guide whispered 'He will begin with an audience, and then he will give a sermon.'

One of the master's students looked up and shouted out in our direction. 'Quiet at the back, you Jewish trash !'

We fell silent.

One of the Iranians turned to me and made a gesture as if to cut my tongue out with a pair of scissors.

Charming, you fucking Persian wog.

Mufti Hittite-lal and his entourage took a few moments settling themselves on the platform.

Their shuffling about reminded me of dogs settling in their baskets.

Then, from a room to the left, we heard sobbing.

A woman, dressed in black and veiled, and obviously in great distress, was ushered into the gathering.

I saw one of the Master's acolytes stood up and flicked a switch on the wall behind him.

Then he adjusted two microphones on short stands on the

floor - one pointing at the master and the other at the supplicant.

The woman was positioned in front of the Master's platform and urged to speak.

Her sobs, amplified into the tannoy, reverberated unsettlingly about the room.

'Hush, sister, hush,' said the Master in a gentle, comforting voice, though with a marked Viennese accent. 'There, there, sister. Stop your crying. Hush, tell us your difficulties, my dear sister. Come, tell.' He held out a hand to her as a gesture of tenderness.

My guide, his voice cracking with passion, whispered in my ear. 'This is the sweetest man in the Middle East…so sweet….'

I nodded, as did many others who heard the comment.

'Master, oh Master. My husband is sick….my children have no food….' she began, between sobs.

The Master nodded. 'Go on, my child.'

The woman began to sob uncontrollably, and mumbled inaudibly into her chador.

It was a typical, faintly boring, tale of Arab-Palestinian woe.

Hittite-lal suddenly raised his palm, cutting her short. 'You have indulged in sexual practices ? You have fucked many men ? You are fucking every day ?'

His tone was stern, even severe.

'No Master no !' she wailed. 'My husband is unable to work…we have no food….'

'You have committed adultery ?'

'No Master ! My children….'

'Masterbation, nuh ?' He turned to his students for confirmation.

They nodded.

He indicated to the woman to come up on to the platform.

He had her turn around and kneel before him. He put his hand under her chador and probed between her legs.

After some tense moments his examination was complete.

'Clitoris, nuh !' he turned triumphantly to his students.

'No master !' she protested. 'Piles, master ! Piles !'

'Gaaah !' he pushed her away contemptuously. 'Gaaaah !' he rasped into the microphone, making a noise like sandpaper against concrete, and showing us his huge, palpitating pink tongue.

I tried to assume a scholarly expression.

The Iranians looked on attentively.

The other men about me glared angrily at the woman.

Bloody bitch.

I tried to recall some old medical textbooks I think I once browsed through. I vaguely remembered a coloured illustration of a cross-section of the female genitalia, but that was it. There are times when my privileged education really and truly lets me down.

Speaking directly into the tannoy, he made his pronouncement. 'Take this bitch from this place, and circumcise her, according to the very letter of the Koran. I can smell the filthy magh-waghat (clitoris) from where I sit. And you students, do not bring unclean woman before me again. I will not have a clitoris in my madressa !'

'Master, she has been circumcised ! We have certificates from Dr Benny Mohammed of Cape Town !' protested one of the senior students.

'Silence, you Hassidic dog !' the Master roared in a high pitched cackle. 'And if what you say is true, then she must be re-circumcised, and properly this time ! Even if it requires the amputation of her legs and lower torso ! Don't bring me a fucking bitch-on-heat again !' His hands shook with righteous anger.

I nodded in admiration at his swift counsel. Someone like me would probably have confused a number of the profound issues involved, and made a complete mess of the medical

examination, not to say the incisive judgement.

If this was how he dealt with everyday practical affairs, I couldn't wait for his sermon.

We heard the woman screaming in agony from the next room as she was properly circumcised by a group of the senior students. Eventually they stuffed a cloth in her mouth so that we could continue with our spiritual instruction without having to listen to all that fucking din.

I couldn't help chuckling at the easy-going informality of it all.

What a laugh.

The Iranians glared at me, again. Fucking Persian scum.

Then the Master delivered his lecture.

His discourse was, so I was told later, quite unexceptional - he gave chats like it every day - but I considered it one of the most interesting talks I have ever heard. It made my triumph at the Conway Hall in London begin to look very hollow indeed. I resolved to improve the quality of my public speaking with immediate effect. The problem with me is that I am all book-learning - I lack practical experience, the common touch, and a genial bedside manner.

'Before the Most High, in Truth, the facts, curse Satan and all his wicked deeds.' Imam Hittite-lal began, and the audience, including myself, hung breathlessly on his every word.

'Picture the second-hand car salesman. Can he be held responsible for a God-given repair to a faulty car ? He cannot, as only God can give the repair, in Truth. And what is the price, in legal Truth, notwithstanding the directives of Holy Book, of the car ? It cannot be the price on the sales slip, as this is, in the main, open to interpretation. It cannot be the price given at the opening of the contract, as this is liable to change. It cannot be the final price agreed, as this is arbitrarily arrived at. Only the Volkswagen has a standard price, so it cannot be that. The price cannot contradict the parameters written in the Holy Book, as this is both impossible in practice, and a blasphemy in theory. There is the law of the land; then there is the Law of God; and there is the Law of

the Land of God, al-Valhalla. Neither is sufficient, neither is lacking. Both are what they purport to be. Your enemy does not wait to know the price of the vehicle, before driving to kill you. Neither does your death come sooner, because the contract has not been fulfilled, either by the aforementioned party, or the latter.'

And so on.

In fantastic detail, for the next hour and a half.

One of the Iranians next to me, all of whom had been scribbling copious notes, was becoming agitated. He touched his turban with his fingertips, indicating that he wanted to ask a question.

A senior student on the platform, noticing this, bent forward and whispered into the Master's ear.

The Master fell silent and, by glancing at the Iranian, gave permission for his question.

'Master, could not the *contractee* be contained within the unfulfilled contract itself ?' said the Iranian. 'Does not the Law permit the car to be *unowned* by the contractee, whilst residing in the obligation of the vendor, in this case, the salesman whose repair, in truth, has been undertaken ? Surely then both parties agree that the car is at one and the same time, subject to the contract ?'

The Master raised his palm. 'There is only one car in question, and that is the Volkswagen.' A smile played on his lips.

The gathering burst into howls of cathartic laughter. It was the happy, unrestrained giggling of students and young people, united in their love of theological learning, Judeo-Islamic law, and their deep affectionate love of their master.

The Master's joke had been a very good one, even if I hadn't quite fully understood it, and yet it had relieved the tension brought about by the profound intellectual discussion.

I was desperate that the Master should discourse on Nazo-theology. But the gathering was soon brought to an end, and we were all shown out into a sunlight courtyard.

Thinking of the woman who had been brought before the master, I knew that if she were only able to see the error of her ways, she might even become a famous novelist, and travel the world telling us all about the poignant folk-tales of Egypt, or Lebanon, or whatever. Just a thought.

I resolved to see Abdulph Hittite-lal again at the earliest available opportunity.

And so it came to pass.

Mufti Hittite-lal and I strolled along an almost empty beach near Tel Aviv, in the late afternoon.

In front of us, as well as behind us, at a discrete distance, were seven or eight huge bodyguards, each of them in dark glasses and lightweight suits, and carrying walkie-talkies and Uzi sub-machine guns.

'Master, what work remains ?' I asked.

We spoke man-to-man in a guttural but enchanting Viennese piss-house dialect; a very down-to-earth Wittgensteinian rough trade German; and unavoidably every second word seemed to be fuck, shit, nigger, or arsehole.

'Master.....' I let my voice trail off into the landscape.

He did not answer immediately, but instead gazed thoughtfully out to sea.

He continued walking in silence, his hands clasped behind his back.

Gentle wavelets lapped the sands at our feet.

'We have always had the Arabs on our side,' he said. 'Now we have Farrakhan and his bow-tied coons; at the opposite end we have the Klan and the survivalists; we have also the apeshit youth in western countries, the fags in the S&M clubs, the South Americans, and fucking football supporters and sporting types everywhere. All that remains is to convert the Jews, in sufficiently large numbers,' he said.

I waited for him to explain.

'Beautiful sunset,' he said. 'Quite, quite lovely.'

I nodded.

'What do you think of Jane Austen, and the romantic English novel ?' he asked.

I hadn't been expecting this. The breadth of the man's learning ! 'They adapt to television very well,' I replied, hesitantly.

'Do you mean Pride and Pridelessness ?'

'I believe so,' I answered.

'Have you ever been to Korea ?'

I shook my head.

'Fucking lovely place. Japan too,' he said. 'Fucking lovely.'

'I've heard Japan is very modern,' I said.

'Mmm,' he said. 'But China is a piss-hole. Someone should form a plan to try to get rid of those horrible people.'

I could think of nothing to say about China.

We walked on.

'The whole world admires me,' he began, in earnest. 'Nazism is the world's fastest growing religion. We've got rid of the communists and their crap. And the Muslims are doing wonderful groundwork politically, with their nightmarish mentality. And you, with your sociopathic charisma, could easily become Nazo-theology's greatest prophet. God bless you, kind sir. Stay here in Israel, and make this place the cradle of International Nazism and Astrology. My work with Mossad and the Israeli Government is coming to an end; I am old and tired. Although I have been a member of the Israeli secret cabinet for all these years, the Jews are still suspicious of Nazo-theology. Why I cannot fathom, but there it is. They are the most prejudiced people I've ever come across. As thick as planks. I've done my best to have the Star of David and the Muslim crescent replaced by the swastika, but it's been an uphill struggle. Golda Meir never liked me; neither did Ben Gurion. But I believe that you will succeed, somehow, with

your modern appearance, and your unparalleled knowledge of astrology and the trash ethic, and Russ Meyer films.'

'God bless, you, Herr Hitler,' I said, tearfully.

'But,' he went on, 'you are too thin to be taken seriously in the Middle East. You must become a fat shit as soon as possible. You must waddle rather than walk. Your cheeks must look like rosy buttocks, and your expression must be stupidly babyish. Let spittle dribble out of the corners of your mouth. And where are your fucking pyjamas ?'

I lowered my head in shame.

'Cherry blossom, in spring, is one of my favourite sights,' he said, wistfully.

Then his expression clouded over

'Look at this,' he said, lifting up his robe to reveal a gigantic jet-black penis, neatly circumcised, and in a state of tumescent sexual readiness.

Christ.

So Dr Rogers was right !

'Impressive,' I said, and meant it.

I honestly hadn't seen a knob like that outside of a sex toy catalogue; it glistened in the evening light, and looked to have been recently oiled; the head and shaft combined must have measured ten inches, and the girth was thick enough to pleasure a full-lipped negress. And the Mufti's balls were the size of tinned peaches. Just below the left ball, dangling at the end of an amazingly fashionable silver scrotal ring, was a dinky solid gold swastika, together with an Iron Cross, First Class.

Beat that, San Francisco ! Beat it !

'I'm a hundred and seven years old, and I can still fuck a kid like Michael Jackson.' he said. 'And I owe all this to the successful application of Nazo-theology and a scientific diet. Between you and me, the stiff cock is the very essence of the nazi salute. And if you think I have tertiary syphilis, think again, punk.'

I nodded, thinking again of Guy de Maupassant and Frank

Harris.

He put a hand on my shoulder, and drew me to him, and pushed my head downwards. 'Would you suck me off, give an old man relief ?'

I glanced down at his nightmarish hard-on.

'Sorry, Mein Führer; no thanks. I'm not that kind of guy,' I said, a little unkindly. Dirty old bastard.

'Don't tell me you like women, you bitch !' he sneered.

I was hating this.

He turned to one of the bodyguards. 'Hey, Simey ! What was the name of the security police chief ? You know, the fat shit-boy in shorts ?'

The bodyguard showed no sign of having heard the question, but continued to scan the beach in all directions.

'Gaaah !' spat Adolf angrily, before turning back to me, and shaking his head. 'Mossad ! No fucking sense of humour.'

We walked on.

Adolf eventually let his robe fall back over his member.

'One last conceptual difficulty,' he said.

I was all ears.

'We must get the Jews to convert to Christianity before joining us,' he said. 'It will give their cruelty an edge it might otherwise lack. In his natural state, the Jew is as gentle as a lamb to the slaughter.'

I'd never heard so much piffle in my life !

'What makes you think so ?' I asked, astonished.

'Don't argue with me, young man,' he said firmly. 'You haven't watched as much television as I have.'

I nodded. I was starting to feel very inadequate again.

'All right, young man,' he said, paternally. 'Off you go.'

I gave a firm Hitler salute - surely the most noble of man's

greetings - and goose-stepped smartly off towards my waiting taxi.

I left the old man, alone with his thoughts, and his bodyguards, on the beach.

Form the rear window of my cab, I saw Herr Hitler propositioning an attractive Jewess as she strolled along the sands. A few seconds later, with the Mossad boys taking a smoke break and chatting about Uzis, I saw him lift up her kaftan and, urging her to bend over, mount her.

What a sight.

That night, back at my hotel, I was overcome by the urge to smash every piece of Ikea furniture I could find in my room

Adolf was already waiting outside the arthouse cinema box-office when I arrived.

He looked smaller than I remembered, and, on his own, without his burly Mossad escort, almost a little vulnerable.

He was wearing baggy blue flannel trousers, a Harris tweed sports jacket, and a pair of mustard loafers. He had slicked his famous hair away from his forehead, and had trimmed his Islamic beard fashionably. He looked like an elderly but successful crime novelist; comfortable in his well-chosen clothes, and comfortable with himself, by way of his well-earned status.

He waved as he saw me making my way across the road.

'Glad you could make it,' I said politely.

He brushed my comment aside.

'What's showing ?' he asked.

'Wavelength,' I said. 'And some Stan Brakhage.'

'Bah !' he said, dismissively, but enigmatically.

Did he mean that the films was stupid, or that my choice of them was ?

Unsettled, I handed our tickets to the doorman, and we went inside.

We were required to climb some stairs.

Adolf studied some of the film posters advertising forthcoming attractions displayed next to the auditorium door. Coming soon, some Hollis Frampton. I think I'd seen them.

He insisted that we stop at the cinema café.

He had me buy a six-pack of strong lager, some ham and cress sandwiches on rye, and two big daddy-sized bags of Kettles' barbecue bacon-flavoured crisps.

A slovenly usherette, fondling - nay masturbating - an enormous flashlight gave us complicated directions as to where we were supposed to sit.

Eventually, after a series of false trails, I managed to locate our seats, with Adolf following me patiently up and down the cheaply carpeted staircases, and along darkened walkways.

'Here we are, Mein Führer,' I said, respectfully.

'You sit on the aisle,' he ordered. His old military training shining through like a blaze of glory.

No sooner had we taken our places than the house lights went down.

We both cracked opened cans of lager and sipped them as the film began.

I don't know how many times I've seen Wavelength.

And when the lights came up for the interval, I could think of nothing to say.

The Führer turned to me. 'What's that bitch up to ?' he asked, pointing to a busty student clutching a tray.

'She's the ice-cream seller,' I answered.

Eventually the girl, inching along foolishly, made it to our row.

'Any custard trifle with added fresh cream ?' Adolf asked her, loudly, in Hebrew.

'Wut ?' the girl's South African accent was pulverising.

'Any vegetable samosas ? Poppadoms ?' the Führer asked, this time in English.

'Hey ? Leave me, fucking leave me you fucking creep !' she wailed hysterically.

'Give the Führer a sherry trifle !' I roared.

'Kraaist ! I'm only a fucking ice-cream seller,' she whined angrily. 'Fuck off, you bloody junk. You're both fucking cracked. Leave me !'

'Fuck you, you dirty African slut !' I roared.

'Now, now,' said Hitler to me firmly, sensibly calming the situation.

I angrily tore open another beer. How dare an uneducated rock-spider whore talk to the Führer like that ! These art-houses are prepared to employ more or less anyone, nowadays. I was trembling with rage.

Hitler craned his neck about the auditorium, studying its many dust-encrusted architectural features.

I prayed for the interval to end.

Eventually it did.

After a truly disgusting advertisement about diarrhoea, the Brakhage shorts opened. All I can remember is a lurid close-up of a vagina.

Yeah, yeah.

I had seen it all before.

And no doubt would see it all again.

Suddenly, somewhere below me, to my right, the sound of a tight stream of running water, accompanied by a startlingly caustic smell.

Heavens !

The Führer was casually and fulsomely pissing up against the seat in front of him !

When he had finished, and zipped back up, I sensed him

staring intently at me.

Did he want my fucking approval ?

What for ?

And those black nazi eyes ! Oh you bitch.

But when in Rome.

I unzipped and, having primed my knob, self-consciously leaked a few drops out on to the curved scratch-panel on the back of the seat in front of me.

The Dictator of the Third Reich seemed satisfied.

Fortunately no one was occupying seats anywhere near us.

Say what you like but, in a way, our shared experience - our mutual urinating, our brotherly piss - surely said something about the ontological astrology of fascism, and the rich inner life of nationalist mythology. I'm so sorry a big black man like Louis Farrakhan was not there to share this tinkle with us. But perhaps, thanks to the pioneering volumes of Dr Rogers, and others, he was.

Afterwards, we dropped in at a nearby brasserie for coffee.

'When are you going back to London ?' he asked.

'I think I'll have to go soon, Mein Führer,' I said. 'My work is almost done.

'Oh,' he said nonchalantly.

Did I detect a note, however faint, of sadness ? Did I mean anything at all to this strange old Arab who had single-handedly gassed so many grannies, and changed the entire course of western history ?

We sat quietly munching our Chelsea buns and sipping our cappuccinos, like a couple of stupid old fags on a date.

'What is your favourite album ?' I asked him.

'Filth, by Swans,' he answered immediately, before

volunteering, 'I listen to it at least once a day, as loud as my Palestinian neighbours will tolerate. Through it, I hear the resolution of the mind-body problem, and the unearthly calling of a distant land.'

He smiled at me, and I smiled back.

It was all very relaxed.

I felt very affectionate towards the old prick. He was genuinely likeable.

'May I order you a brandy ?' I asked.

He hummed, and nodded. 'That would be nice.'

He sat peacefully with his hands clasped in his lap.

I signalled to a waiter.

'What is your favourite classical piece of classical music ?' I continued.

'Another easy one,' he said. 'Stockhausen: Mixtur.'

'Which version ?'

'One.' He was emphatic.

Someone elbowed the back of the old man's rattan chair by mistake, and apologised profusely.

Our brandies arrived.

'What does Mixtur do for you ?' I asked.

He paused.

'Cheers.' he said, raising his glass. 'Oh, this is nice.' He admired the bouquet. 'Delicious. Well, I think it was Allen Ginsberg who said 'Back in Times Square, Dreaming of Times Square.' So here I am, in the Holy Land. And this music reminds me to forget.'

'Forget ?'

'Forget the long, dreadful years of the war, and of exile.'

'What about those war years,' I asked, plucking up courage. 'How do you look back on them ?'

He paused.

'A performance, if you like, gone horribly, horribly wrong.'

A performance ! What a choice of word !

I nodded.

The atmosphere seemed palpably even more relaxed. The old man, looking more like Carl Jung every minute, had become expansive. I took out an exercise book and an HB pencil, the tip of which I licked.

'Mein Führer, what do you really look for in a woman ?'

A flicker of irritation. 'We are not here to talk about fucking women,' he said.

I shrugged.

Of course; he was thinking about his beloved Eva.

But where was Eva ? I certainly had no idea.

Were those tears lubricating those faraway eyes, or brandy fumes ? We shall never know, but I know. I know.

Try another angle.

'Could you name a favourite film ? Your absolute number one ?' I asked.

I expected the old fool to name some galloping piss like 'Casablanca'.

He nodded. 'Sure.' He paused. 'Wavelength.'

'What !' I exclaimed. I couldn't believe my ears !

He smiled. 'Wavelength.'

'The film we've just seen ?' I asked delightedly.

He nodded, beaming, now.

'Had you seen it before ?' My excitement was mounting.

'No.'

I grinned from ear to ear. I chuckled with delight. I had just taken Hitler to see his favourite film of all time !

'Did you know the work of Michael Snow ?' I was struggling to contain myself.

'I'd read about it in Cahiers, or Fangoria, I think. But that is all.'

So there you are !

Beat that, you nazi cunts worldwide ! Seig heil ! Seig heil ! I struggled to stop my arm from erecting itself in a nazi salute. I wanted to dance a jig on the table !

Suddenly the old man bent towards me confidentially.

I responded by doing the same towards him.

'Where are the restrooms ?' he whispered.

I pointed to a door with a spread-eagled mannikin motif on it.

He appeared to hesitate.

I bent further forward. 'Are you going to do a shit, Mein Führer ?' I whispered.

He looked startled. 'What ?'

'Are you going to have a crap, Herr Chancellor ?'

He looked genuinely afraid. He swallowed hard. 'Why ?' he asked.

I leant back in my rattan chair. 'I could read it for you,' I said, confidently.

'Read it ?' He was bewildered. 'What the fuck are you talking about, nuh ?'

I sensed the resurgence of the old Arab in him.

'Read it. Read it,' I repeated. 'It's an astrological gift. I read it like some people read bones, signs, dice, Tarot cards, or newspapers. Haven't you read the book by Chief Johnny Two-Rivers ?'

'Gaaah !' he spat. 'You watch the Joan Rivers Show ?'

Me and my big astrological mouth. I had ruined a

perfectly good evening.

Two giggling Jewish girls appeared at the Führer's side. One of them asked, self-consciously 'May we have your autograph, Sir ?'

Adolf obliged with a smile, and his famous titled scrawl. It read 'To Shoshy, with much love, Addy Hitler.'

The waiter intervened. 'Excuse me, Herr Hitler, Sir, but I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to move on. Quite a number of people are queuing up for your autograph, and our customers are being distracted.'

'Yes, yes. I quite understand,' said the old man considerately, signalling to me.

We left some Shekels on the table, and wandered outside into the warm evening air.

I felt maniacally up; I felt fucking wonderful.

I whistled 'Eidelweiss' from 'The Sound of Music'.

Our hands in our pockets, our jackets unbuttoned, we strolled casually along the street, enjoying the many sights and sounds and of a vibrant Middle Eastern people at leisure.

I never did get to read the old boy's dump, thank Kraaist.

The cold.

The trees.

The railways.

Wood; string, straw; meat; dried meat.

Sausage, cabbage.

Pepper.

Gristle; poor-quality meat.

Fire.

Cold.

Tracks.

The laughter.

I wrote an article on my meeting with Hitler for some Jewish right-wing magazine or other. Phrases included: 'Despite his bloodthirsty rhetoric and his uncompromising stance, Hitler turned out to be a perversely likeable man....Indeed I became distinctly - and perhaps unsettlingly - fond of him...Attempts to get him deported are misguided....many of his urbane Jewish critics spout the same form of bigotry under a different guise...' and so on. I don't know if anyone read it.

While I was in Jerusalem I was asked to give a talk at the Hilton to a small group of professionals. I don't know who they were; perhaps I ought to have been told. I chose the topic 'Sexual Harassment in the Workplace.' I spoke about the increasing eye-breast contact between males and female employees as becoming unexceptional; I spoke about an increase in eye-vaginal contact, as well as the taboo subject of eye-anal contact.. 'Women can hardly type a letter anymore, without someone attempting to penetrate them,' I concluded.

Applause was muted, to say the least.

A stocky, bearded Jewish brute came over to me afterwards. 'What the fuck are you trying to do ?' he asked rhetorically, in a dense South African accent. 'You deserve to get drilled.'

Yeah.

The last evening, whenever it was, when I went to the Führer's apartment, I think it had been raining.

What makes me say that ?

Because the streets of the quarter in Jerusalem where I was staying, smelt putrid.

I had spent the last two days in my hotel room, alone, with

the curtains drawn, with instructions not to be disturbed under any circumstances, except by prostitutes giving the code-words 'Man Ray' to the night porter.

The door to the apartment was at the end of a wrought-iron outside stairwell.

The evening air was stale and thick and humid.

I knocked. I waited.

A horrible old woman, half a century past her best, her lank grey hair tied in a bun, her flabby torso swathed in a semen-stained field-grey kaftan, answered; and invited me inside.

'Hermy, who is it ?' called a voice in another room.

'It's your young gentleman, Addy.' said the woman.

'Send him in,' said the voice, and I recognised it to be that of the Führer.

I was ushered into a sparsely-furnished and undecorated front room.

The man himself, looking thoroughly relaxed and at home, was lounging on a threadbare floral-patterned Ikea sofa. He was wearing a pair of black boxer shorts and a white tee-shirt, and was watching a flickering black and white video on an ancient wood-veneered TV set in the far corner.

The milky thighs of his old legs were lumpy and varicose-veined.

'Have a popper.' He offered me a red plastic mug of them.

I took one and cracked it.

I recognized the video, the sound turned low, to be Kuramoto's Unabridged Agony.

A woman, tied to an office swivel chair, is being spun around and around.

I glanced at the titles on Addy's video shelf.

Cannibal Holocaust; Men Behind the Sun; Emanuelle in America; a grubby four-box set of Claude Lanzmann's Shoah; The

Animal Film.

From the kitchen, the sound of a beer bottle dropping on to the stone floor. Followed by a loud 'Fuck it !' from the old woman.

'Clumsy bitch !' roared Herr Hitler.

The woman in the swivel chair, still spinning.

'What can I offer you, chum ?' Adolf asked me.

'Carlsberg,' I answered.

'Sure,' he said, pointing to a squat refrigerator next to the sofa.

I glanced at the titles of the neat vertical stack of books on the floor beside the TV.

A couple of paperbacks by George Steiner; a copy of Teach Yourself Philosophy; Martin Buber's 'I and Thou'; a Koran; a well-thumbed Spartacus International Club Guide; Wilbur Smith's 'When the Lion Feeds'; something by Doris Lessing, the Torture Garden; a book about Bob Flanagan; some Stephen Kings. And a couple of Agatha Christies.

Yeah, sure.

The woman is tortured with white noise.

Our conversation was desultory.

Addy asked me about the state of independent film-making in England. What the fuck's that got to do with anything, I asked myself. I asked him if he'd seen the Yahweh broadcast. Looking bored, he shook his head. 'I never watch classical music on TV, even if it is the Jerusalem Philharmonic.' he said, adding, 'The fact is, I hardly ever watch the telly.'

The old woman shuffled in with some snacks on a tray.

Cheesy biscuits; twiglets, pork scratchings, anchovies, dry roasted peanuts.

She stank; it was as if she had never washed.

Who was she ?

A cold shiver ran down my spine. What's the matter with me, you fucking idiot ! I roared silently to myself.

Eva !

Eva Braun !

But I was wrong.

'You remember Reichsmarshall Göring,' said Addy to me, pointing to the fat slag.

I nodded, stunned.

The old woman smiled at me. 'Don't keep Addy up too late,' she said. 'He's got to go to Beirut tomorrow for the launch of another Arab edition of Mein Kampf.'

'Gaaah !' said the Führer dismissively.

That old Arab again.

Which reminded me: 'What exactly did you mean by the Volkswagen joke at the meeting the other day ?' I asked.

'Volkswagen Beetle ? Fucking good car. The best,' he answered.

'The joke,' I repeated.

'What joke ?'

'Somewhere in all that fucking dogshit about contracts and obligations,' I said.

He looked puzzled. 'I make many jokes,' he said.

Göring agreed. 'He makes many jokes.' He sat himself down on the sofa next to the Führer.

I took a sip of my Carlsberg.

The woman has her hair torn from her scalp.

Hermy and Addy were cracking poppers. Fag magazines, boys with big cocks, shafting and sucking one another in Californian sunshine, were passed around. Göring rolled his air-force grey kaftan up to his upper thighs and rubbed his legs. He did not have on any underwear. We could see his diminutive

circumcised cock and undersized testicles. I thought the horrible old bastard was going to jerk off but, like a tedious passage out of an Alexander Trocchi novel, he ritualistically prepared a needle and shot up into his left thigh. Sighing, he collapsed back against some greasy, beer-stained scatter cushions. Hitler put his hand between Göring's legs and attempted to manipulate the Reichmarshall's tool, but was not able to generate an erection. Göring responded by rubbing the Führer's crotch, through his boxer shorts. I could see the huge snake of a nazi knob spring to life. Not that again ! Hitler slipped out of his pants, and Hermy went down on him, bobbing and sucking noisily. Never underestimate the elderly nazi.

I'd had enough.

I sprang out of my chair and strode over to the open French windows leading on to the flat's balcony, just gasping for a breath of fresh air.

I cracked another popper.

I looked out across Jerusalem, at the roofs of various churches, temples, mosques, cult centres, psychiatric institutions, arthouse cinemas, film-making co-operatives, video libraries, video production units, video stores, thrift stores, flea markets, and whatever else.

I was really not sure if this whole nazo-theological thing was really me.

Not sure at all.

Honestly, I'd never really been a great fan of the Middle East.

But I'd come such a long way.

I'd put so much effort into it.

There was no going back.

There is no going back.

On my way back in the aeroplane to London I was astonished and delighted to be given a seat right next to the justly

famous Minister Farrakhan, or was it Muhammed Ali or Mike Tyson ? Perhaps it was just another harmless haji making his way back to the filthy satanic west.

Either way, we chatted and twittered about the metaphysics of bare-knuckle boxing, in some considerable detail.

My body felt relaxed, and relieved, and at peace.

And I have a fifty-first birthday coming up.

****

Ice Creamer

Something very special about air travel: the way it bleeds fear into your soul. The tightening of the stomach. The queasiness. The hands around the throat. The screaming. The dementia. The flailing of arms, we're all going to fucking die ! Mayday ! Mayday ! Jesus, fuck !

Terrible. Yes.

Yet, if you think about it, all of human life probably began in the air; and after all, the planet we live on is floating in air of sorts - intergalactic-space-air; and women often give birth to twins or sextuplets on planes; and don't forget all those mile-highers fucking one another, again and again, in cramped airline toilets, or jerking off during uncensored in-flight porno movies, or flirting with hostesses in bum-tight serge miniskirts, or shooting lick-snatch films in tight galleys awash with listeria-ridden packaged food; or passing semen-encrusted copies of beaver magazines to-and-fro across the aisles.

Air travel is getting to be quite disgusting.

This has not been a happy year for me: my assignment, courtesy of the publicity wing of Advance Iran International, I think they're called (who cares ?) was to travel to the Islamic

Republic, and report favourably in the popular press, on selected tourist destinations.

No problem.

None at all.

Except that there was a gigantic problem: 'Respectfully observe our age-old Islamic customs and refrain from alcoholic consumption, kerb crawling, paedophilia, loan-sharking, westernisation, pro-Israeli thinking, and the rest.'

Sure.

I wanted to go to Mauritius, but they sent Martin Amis instead; the bastard fucks.

I normally never use vulgar language unless I've had a drink or two, or if something really makes me fucking angry.

What is it ?

What is it, now.

I remember once reading a disturbing pamphlet, printed in London, probably at some little hand-cranked beer-fuelled press near Whitechapel - Angel Alley most likely - telling me that, one million and thirty-three or thirty-nine years before I was born, a bullet had been fired at my head, from furthest outer space, and that it was constantly hurtling through the ether towards me, and would one day enter my head at the third eye, smashing my skull and scattering my teeth, and then driving on, into the very marrow of my being itself.

Somehow, don't ask me for detail, whenever I'm drinking, whenever my mind starts to cloud over, I connect this pamphlet with air travel.

The author was some complete fucking fruitcake called Intergalactic Babu Mickey Reeves.

Air travel; flying thousands of metres above the earth, a

fascinating experience; imprisoned, incarcerated, captured; for the duration, in this iron lung, this silver cigar, this dazzling gilded phallus, this cylindrical sarcophagus, this flying pig, this disorienting doodle-bug.

As a journalist, I must keep practising my one-liners.

Christ, how do you get out of these planes, you can bang on the windows, but you're stuck there buddy, you'd better believe it: no one gets off until the fucking thing lands.

What sort of plane was this ? The fact is, I can't distinguish one plane from another - I couldn't tell a stealth bomber from a Zeppelin - though I've probably spent more time up than down, I've clocked up billions of air miles, high as a kite, let's go fly !

After a few cheap drinks I fell in with a group of flat-back-packer types, American lady prostitutes with rucksacks and Masters degrees; the talk was of hash and gash, dope and dick, I could cope with it, but conversationally it was all somewhat turgid.

I just wanted to get to sleep, for godsake, just let me get some wine-dark sleep in the wine-dark sky.

Then we moved into chapter and verse on Ginsberg and Burroughs; okay, I said, I surrender, come on girls.

Inevitably we had to deal with Herbert Huncke.

Since we were in Beat mode, I tried to steer the topic on to Doris Wishman films, but they weren't having it. None of them had even seen a film by Doris. Well, they weren't going to see any in Iran, that's for sure, Miss Icky-Picky-Choosey, why travel to Iran in the first place ? There's nothing for the buck-for-a-fuck crowd there, except the possibility of one of their number being executed publicly.

A lot of these Beat girls are very prejudiced, in their own way; very narrow-minded.

I mean, christ, they were going to holiday in Aspen.

Aspen is not in Iran, somebody tell them, please.

To make matters worse, I had forgotten to pack my books on Iran, my font of facts: the rough guides, the shoestring chronicles, the lonely planetariums, et al. I had forgotten every single one of my reference works as well, my copies of Encylopedia Iranica, Bibliographica Persiana, Indica Zoroastriana, Cambridge Histories of Iran, and the rest.

The essence of the problem was, I had forgotten even to buy any of these books in the first place; why would I want all those heavy tomes in my suitcase, they would be a millstone around my neck, they're a load of piss. I like the plain and simple raw facts; I want them in my face, I don't want to read about them. Who, for example, would want to read about a vagina, or look at a series of pictures of one in a magazine, when you could stick your own finger in a real hole ?

Well, I would, for a start - I like pussy pictures.

I couldn't find any real women on my plane, I looked high and low, behind every curtain, and into every cubicle.

No real women at all.

Except for those so-called Beat Girls.

I really didn't fancy any of them.

Except when one of them took off her jeans and knickers and did a series of lascivious gyrations near the galley.

Destination Tabriz.

I don't even remember which terminal I took at Heathrow, it honestly doesn't matter. Who on earth flies to Tabriz these days, now that Iran is in the hands of the mullahs ? Not me. Not bloody likely. Anyway, there are no flights to Tabriz, only Tehran. I made a mental note to get off in Madrid. I could always fax my story from there; who would know ? Certainly not the sub on my shit rag.

I think I passed out somewhere over Albania, or Turkey, and underwent a near-death experience; astral projection and all

the rest: I've been working too hard, too many deadlines, too many travel magazines; too many fucking Condé Nast cocktail parties - drinking cheap white laced with anti-freeze - I struggled to keep awake once we had taken off; I took altogether too much acid in the sixties, seventies, eighties and nineties, Madrid is the most expensive city in Northern Europe, I used to live in Norway, they made me a Buffalo, I know what I'm talking about, I wish I'd led a healthier life, the flight seemed to be taking forever - flying over all this bloody water - in a way I just wanted to get it over with. It doesn't take twelve hours to get to Tehran, but it did this time. I asked a hostess as I stumbled, like a mine-donkey, blinking and screaming at the blinding light, out of the fuselage, how long the flight had taken, and she said 'You'll be fine, Sir, if you'll only open your heart, and let Jesus in.'

Is that any way to speak to a passenger ? 'Honestly, what did she say ?' I asked a passerby.

'Tie a yellow ribbon round your fucking cock, lowlife,' said a huge, grinning bear of a man in a plaid shirt. And thank you, too.

I swear to god I was in that crate for an eternity.

And oh yes, an incredible garbled announcement over the tannoy, by a very aggressive hostess, as we came into land - 'You're all going to die, you swine. Kiss your fucking sphincters adios ! Die, fuckers, die !'

Terrifying nonsense.

Then they played Motorhead through the airplane sound system, shaking the fucking guts out of us.

I remember the pilot grabbing the mike, and screaming into the sound system 'Fuck you ! Fuck you ! Fuuuuck !'

Jesus.

Obviously the pilot was out of his mind.

And then, when I came to, the whole plane was filled with stone ! There were rocks in the luggage racks, boulders in the seats, pebbles in the aisles, shingles in the galley.

Bizarre.

I felt shit, really rough, rotten.

Perhaps my plane was one of those ore-carrying spaceships I saw in Alien; the Nostromo.

I don't even know what language the woman was speaking, I could have sworn it was Basque ! Talk about Mexico ! Talk about remote valleys and forgotten people.

Perhaps it was the Arab connection; those dark-skinned people from Seville.

I asked the hostesses what the name of the plane was - a simple enough question - and I swear to god her lips were covered in semen - she said 'It's the Nostromo, you ignorant fuckwad.'

So there you are.

I was too stunned to reply.

These airlines really ought to tighten up on their recruitment, to say nothing of their staff training.

Farsi, the lingua franca of modern Iran, is one of the world's oldest languages, predating even Sanskrit, to say nothing of such relative newcomers, Latin and Greek, to say absolutely nought of that baby of all communication, English.

Always leave a tip in a restaurant, or if a bellboy gives you any favours; ten percent is considered sufficient. I'd been warned against the Iranian bellboys - they'd fellate you and then run splabbing to a mullah. Anyway, I don't want a bloody bellboy, I want a woman. I'm sick of this closet paedophile aspect to travel, christ let's just do some straight fucking for a change, let's be completely revolutionary and go to a foreign country and for once fuck only the women.

Honestly I didn't fancy going to Iran, even if it was for a dogshit broadsheet Murdoch Saturday or Sunday supplement.

I was afraid.

The land of the mullahs; public executions; people tortured in public; people tortured in private, people executed behind closed doors, people buggered up against doors, and nailed

to doors; men, women and children done to death; gore, gore, gore: maimed and mutilated people slithering around the pavements, martyrs piled up to the ceiling in your fucking hotel room; cattle and goats slaughtered in the streets, the gutters black with clotted blood, some of it seeping into your fucking bed; horrible Islamic discussions taking place everywhere, plotting bombs, murder and gore, oh Jesus; come back and sort this fucking mess out, all is forgiven, we didn't mean any of it.

Breathtaking scenery, genuinely friendly people; the amenities apparently spartan but surprisingly comfortable; and the bill for the whole sumptuous six-course meal coming to less than the cost of a newspaper in New York. Attractive handicrafts can be bought duty-free at the airport, and the staff are friendly, smartly-dressed, courteous and honest.

Customs, again; this time of the border crossing sort, but surprisingly little bother with them; I was startled by the American accent of the handsome, if slightly simian, Jane Fonda-type woman at passport control, not even dressed in a fucking chador, but instead in a semen-stained blue uniform of the sort to be seen in airport lounges, airport toilets and airport-linked motels the world over.

It was snowing when we landed in Tehran.

And what a beautiful city, perched up in the mountains, fringed with Douglas Firs; the log cabins modern, spacious and elegantly designed. People on the streets were expensively, if casually, dressed; the men smartly bearded, the women pony-tailed.

Iranians have light skins; despite all the prejudicial trash we read in the newspapers, they are surprisingly westernised – they're not coons - and on the streets I saw hardly any evidence of strict Islamic clothing, and instead of evil mullahs leering and pissing down at me from billboards, there were advertisements for reassuringly everyday consumer items: Marlboro, Lucky Strike, Coca Cola, Nike, Versace, Gucci, Galliano, Vivienne Westwood, and some French cunt or the other, I can't remember his name, he couldn't design a fucking frock to save his life, I really don't know what he thinks his game is, the last woman I saw in one of his rig-outs looked like a fucking vandalised corpse at an abattoir. No

more fashion assignments for me; I'm sticking to travel. Do you know they tried to send me to Romania ? The next time I fill in a job application, I'm putting at the top in big letters: 'Say what you like, I'm not fucking going to Romania.' No hack in their right mind should ever have to go to Romania.

American films can be seen at the cinemas in Iran; newsagents and bookshops are well-supplied with the latest titles - I was even able to buy a copy of 'Women Who Like Men With Big Cocks' - printed and published in Santa Barbara - at the cover price ! And everywhere the dollar was cheerfully accepted, without the least anti-American sentiment. Do you know that at some hotel in Barbados, the fucking management tried to charge me $100 for a copy of the New York Times ? Of course I put it on the tab anyway, because Murdoch would be paying, but for fucksake, what kind of a price is that ! And my room was just across the passage from Michael Winner's. Perhaps that's what I was paying for, it figures. I thought of trying to get Winner's autograph for my daughter, only I don't have a daughter.

Fuck I wish I had.

I wish.

I should have married Wanda and settled down years ago. Then I could go to parents' meetings and find out how my kids are getting on at school.

Christ, most of the people on the streets, well-dressed in jeans and tartan shirts, even looked like Americans ! I saw almost no evidence of people wrapped in stained tea-towels, soiled bathrobes or manky Arab sheets.

Home from home; these people looked presentable enough to me.

Officials were courteous and helpful.

At one stage, in downtown Baghdad - the bustling Iranian commercial capital - after a hastily-eaten meal of a flame-grilled Whopper, double fries with extra ketchup and double Pepsi, I just

had to have a shit, I just had to, I was desperate with Delhi belly, and I was probably miles from my hotel room. I asked someone in the street for the nearest restrooms, and was directed to the rear of a gas station. I expected to have to squat and fart, Iranian style, in the gutter, with my buttocks and anus in full view of perfect strangers, with gaggles of giggling Islamic schoolgirls in chadors squealing as my non-vegetarian turds hit the pavement, but was pleasantly surprised to discover instead a relatively clean washdown toilet, with a sensible plumbing, and a perfectly lockable cubicle door ! After my ablutions I was able to wash my hands with good quality Palmolive soap, and dry my hands on a functioning hot-air dryer. All the bullshit I had been led to believe by press reports about the third world is quite meaningless. Of course it exists, if you look for it, but the degradation is greatly exaggerated. Who writes this sort of trash ? Sumptuous meals and affordable, well-made handicrafts at realistic prices; excellent value for the budget traveller, or travelling reseller, or peripatetic wholesaler.

You had to laugh.

I was strolling through a huge tree-filled, well-kept, well-attended park in the centre of Tehran - Mohammed's Park, I think it was called, something like that, I'll check the map when I get back to LA - very much a family environment, with jugglers, therapists, tricksters, Jungians and unicyclists everywhere; when I came across a group of tall, shiny-headed, severe-looking negroes, all dressed to a tee, resplendent in Saville Row suits, Raybans and expensive, professionally-knotted clip-on silk bow ties.

Switching immediately to jive, I rapped with them as best I could: 'Hey muthafokky nigga ! Ho bitch fokky honky bitch nigga fukky ! Ho bitch ? Ho bitch fukky ! Fukky bitch nigga fokky ho nigga fukky !'

Anyway, to cut a long story short; it turned out that these brutal-looking ebony automatons were acolytes of one Elijah Mohammed; and were themselves peddling an uncompromisingly violent brand of negroid Islam ! What a waste of time ! Someone should have told them that Iran was already completely converted ! Coals to Newcastle, jesus. I burst out laughing when I heard what they were up to. I nearly pissed myself.

I did piss myself.

Because somewhere in Mohammed's Park, in the centre of Tehran, an involuntary spasm emptied the entire contents of my bladder into my pants. I simply had to stand there until it was over. I couldn't get to a hotel, I couldn't get to a urinal, I couldn't see any Islamic pissoirs, although they must have been about. Perhaps I had malaria, I don't know. Not a happy incident, but my bags soon dried in the blistering Iranian sun.

Despite twenty years of strict Islamic rule, prostitution still exists in Iran. In some areas of downtown Shiraz, I think it was, for example - transvestites, mutilants, mutants, dwarves and animals were readily available for sexual gratification, but only at a price. In one rather unattractive establishment - flaking stucco and buzzing neon - ('Señor Culo') admittedly run by non-Iranians - Mexicans, I think - absurd ! a Mexican enclave in Iran ! - I was offered both a sandpaper handjob and a chili-pepper enema for less than eighty US dollars. Translating that into culinary terms, I could have had several thousand first-class Persian meals for the same price. I'm not interested in all this S&M stuff myself, but my boss is, or at least, he believes busloads of jerk-fuck Germans read our fascist shit-rag in the international edition.

Turkey, too, offers excellent value for the budget traveller. Despite the litter in the streets (and what city doesn't have a litter problem these days !) - Iranian houses are scrupulously clean, and none of our touring party suffered any stomach upsets, which is more than can be said for Chicago ! (A group of obese fucks from Texas, their pockets stuffed with complimentary chips from Atlanta, barfed-out on bad burgers off Maxwell Street and went down - went down badly - the stupid fucks. If they'd stuck to Iranian food, they'd have been fine.)

Okay, so Iranian food is excellent value, dollar for dollar, but the problem was that I really didn't have time to go into Persian restaurants and sample the fare. I was altogether too fucking busy; the best I could do was to gobble the odd hotdog and Whopper, with the odd slab of pizza thrown in. My god, pizza has got to be one of the worst foods around. I can put up with Pizza Express, but as for the rest. I was amazed at how many burger restaurants there were in Iran, though I don't suppose my sponsors will care for my broadcasting that. There were fucking

Burger Kings everywhere, which is just as well, as I can't eat at Macdonald's, it's altogether too fucking gloomy. There were also plenty of other places I recognised: Denny's, Big Boys, International House of Pancakes, Taco Bell - the Americanisation of the Middle East continues apace. I also didn't know that gambling was permitted in Iran, but I hadn't really spent a lot of time brushing up on my facts before arriving. I'm not really all that interested in food. If Murdoch wants to know about food, he could have sent one of those obese egomaniacs from the food columns. Christ, imagine eating for a living; imagine the uncontrolled farting, the enforced colonic irrigations, or the violent retchings after another filthy fucking Chinese meal in Soho, sitting opposite a cadaverous but fashionably-dressed heroin junkie, himself a fucking food critic. Jesus.

Something of the rich irony which offers itself to travellers, if they are sensitive enough to perceive it, if they have ears to hear: a tiny art cinema - I don't remember its name, possibly 'The Electric Shah' - there was a picture of Ayatollah Khomeini somewhere in the lobby - and I don't read Persian - frequented by the Iranian working classes and Mexicans and theological students - fresh from interviews with mullahs - was showing a forgettable little B-number featuring Sally Field as a witless American sucked into the Iranian morass. The film itself could easily be endured with a joint or hip-flask, but what was startling about it was its hostility to the Iranian ideal, and its insensitive questioning of palpable Iranian truths. This type of cheap propagandising does the west no good, and only makes the Iranians more determined to immerse themselves in confusion, degradation, and fuck-headedness. It's as simple as that, if you think about it. The sooner Hollywood gets its act together, the better. And across the road, at a gaudy multiplex, a gigantic poster of Arnold Schwarzenegger, with an unsettling hard-on, surrounded by post-coital women, in another flagrantly anti-Islamic diatribe. The arrogance of the west can, at times, be truly breathtaking, and not a little embarrassing. Imagine, for example, if you went to a foreign country - like Pakistan - and had to see films in which westerners and harmless hippies, and stupid bloody drug-mules, were ridiculed and humiliated by fucking khaki-clad swine with military moustaches ! Which reminds, me, the guy sitting next to me - I'm convinced it was Michael Winner -

had never seen a Doris Wishman film either. I struggled to keep awake during the film, if it hadn't been for my hipflask, I'd never have made it, I couldn't believe that Sally Field would be stupid enough to marry an Iranian, but she did.

What is Sally doing these days ?

They played Willie Nelson as the credits came up, and my god I felt fucking homesick.

I'm not interested in food.

Iran is a vast country; it is possible to get quite lost in its cavernous interior. I had expected mile after mile of desert - and of course the desert is inescapable, but there are also many cool forests and grassy lowlands. Food is cheap and plentiful, and all the talk of terrorism and public executions is greatly exaggerated. Our air-conditioned coaches were of the highest standard, and very comfortable; and I was surprised (and a little disappointed !) never once to have been asked for a bribe or baksheesh by any of the many Islamic officials with whom I was in constant contact. Quaint old customs such as haggling for the price of a bus trip have completely disappeared. We were each issued with legible tickets, and the busses left exactly on time, so there have been some noticeable improvements to everyday life under the mullahs.

Wanda, fuck you.

Fuck you.

Nothing can quite prepare the budget traveller for the breathtakingly beautiful Holy City of Ashfakhan, (I think it was called, I don't know, I can't be sure) unquestionably the pearl-jewel of the Persian crown. It is the cradle of Iranian Shia Islam, and offers breathtaking views of mosques and fortified emplacements and scholarly colleges. It is also the home of a superb Iranian jade, much of which has been beautifully incorporated into mosaics and elaborate arabesque decorations of the breathtakingly highest architectural standard. Aggressive modern neon spoils much of the fucking city now, advertising a raft of products of a singularly secular vulgarity: 'Save Dollars !' 'Big Discounts.'. Westernization has crippled many ancient cities of the third world, nowhere more so than this dump, which is hardly worth visiting now, despite the fact that the Iranian

embassy had told me it was a 'must'. Some of these embassies really ought to update their facts. Christ, that bum-fucking chargé d'affaires must be one of the biggest fucking idiots I've met in a month. When I saw his fag trimmed beard, surgical shirt and moist eyes, I feared the worst.

I was planning on writing something positive about Iranian cinema, but I couldn't think of what the fuck to write, and anyway, Iranian films are terrifyingly boring. I remember reading about the restrictions placed by the mullahs on Iranian directors, fantastic Bunuelian nonsense: no sexual themes; no intersex kissing; no women on screen except in chadors with facial grills; no womens' voices on the soundtrack; no women in roles of any importance; no female genitalia except for filmed clitoridectomies; no villains to be given Islamic names; no filming of dog turds in the street, lest they appear to be spelling out Koranic verses; every scene must depict people at prayer; the west must be shown in a bad light; the only permitted theme is the triumph of martyrdom, and so on.

Actually, I think I did once see one of those films, probably at the NFT in London.

And, sure enough, I don't remember seeing a single fucking dog turd on the screen.

Which reminds me.

On my way back from Iran, flying via Quantas or some such, considerably the worse for drink, I was overwhelmed by the symmetry of the idea of blue ice over the blue mosque.

I looked out of the porthole.

God it gets claustrophobic in these fucking Zeppelins.

Sure enough, a kaleidoscopic view of a holy city; surely Ashfakhan, or whatever it's called, the beautiful blue city of Iranian jade mosaics, millions of miles below us, pearl of Isphahan, Scimitar of Hussein, guardian of the Nile, temple of Babylon.

'Captain !' I screamed, 'Captain ! Let these fucks have a chunk of blue !'

Blue ice, for those who don't know, is airline-speak for the contents of the planes' latrines, ie a shit soup suspended in a blue disinfectant, frozen into deadly blocks of ice by the altitude.

There was a shudder of turbulence as the Captain opened the bays, and dumped a Big Boy on the hapless devotees below.

I rolled around in my seat, pissing myself.

And guess what the in-flight film was called ?

'Blue Ice', with Michael Caine ! I just couldn't stop the pissing !

The stewardess - her tits all over the place - told me the plot was about an airline pilot dropping lumps of blue shit all over the Middle East. I was shrieking like a horse - I must have nearly died of laughter ! Caine must have been the pilot ! I can imagine him sitting there in his fucking pilot's hat. 'Get Carter' is one of my all-time great films. Pretty liberal of the Iranians to show 'Blue Ice' on a domestic flight. 'Take me back to London' - I love the way Caine says that. I wish I could go back to London; Iran is not my idea of home. I begged the stewardess for a gentle handjob, but she said fuck off, I think. Is that any way to talk to a passenger ? And the newspapers on board the plane were full of stories of people in Essex nearly being killed by lumps of blue ice crashing through their houses. Christ, imagine sitting there, getting a handjob from a Lufthansa hostess in front of the telly, when the next minute a huge flying fucking frozen blue turd, the size of a fucking Volkswagen, bursts through your roof, fucking up your bedroom and smashing your fucking Ikea kitchen to bits ! Unbelievably dangerous, living in the flight path of a major airport. But if you think about it, the world is now so criss-crossed with flight-paths, you could as easily be killed by bad luck blue ice in Patagonia as in Essex. Perhaps that's what did for Bruce Chatwin, poor sod, he ought to have looked up into the sky.

Fuck this.

But there is a point at which the sanctimony of a place like Iran can get to be altogether too much. Reminders of its ancient religious heritage were everywhere; the endless minaret, in every shape or form, from dinky little tower, no more than a chimney stack, to full priapic skyscraper. At street level, Tehran can be

overwhelming; the minarets towering over you, and pressing down on you; the bustle of the traffic, and the startling canary-yellow taxis trying to run you over.

I don't know how long I'd been in the country, or where I'd been, or who I'd seen, but I decided to check into a deserted motel in the middle of nowhere, and do some serious fucking drinking, and come to grips with life.

I started the Friday afternoon; and kept it going through Saturday and Sunday, wiping the old hard disk, cleansing the mind, polishing the nerves, recalibrating the brain.

Fuck it was horrible.

I told the woman at the desk to leave me well alone.

Would you believe that at some stage she was sitting at the reception desk, without any pants on ? I couldn't believe it, her great naked buttocks and bush pressed hard and flat against the cheap red plastic seat of a bar stool.

For my part, I sat on the side of my dirty double bed, surrounded by other people's pubic hairs, watching Iranian films on the telly, and drinking.

And drinking.

And vomiting; yes, of course, sick with desolation, and confusion, and the sense of sudden, impending madness.

But the whole horrible ordeal was surprisingly necessary.

And effective.

I'd gone to prison, passing go without collecting, and now I was out.

Freedom !

You can drink your way from one part of the world to another; if you want to, if you've read enough good books.

I knew that's what I had to do.

It can be done.

I started in Qom, and forty bottles later I was in Reno,

with a beautiful girl about to kiss me as only a beautiful girl can.

Don't you believe it.

It wouldn't have been possible.

Alcoholic consumption is forbidden in Iran, and can be punishable by death.

So I was quite surprised to find flourishing bars in the downtown areas of most Iranian cities, although these areas are well off the tourist routes. And although I took the risk and drank a few beers myself, I would not recommend this to fellow voyagers, as one is liable to arrest by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard. After the downfall of the Shah, such Guards were everywhere to be seen, but now they are more discreet, and the preoccupied tourist could escape seeing one altogether.

Iran is a land of laughter, people laughing all the time, laughing at my questions, stupid, inane giggling.

I don't know.

A popular tourist resort is the coastal town of Molacca (Mecca ?), some miles south of Tehran. I thought Mecca was in Saudi. Anyhow, it can easily be reached by bus, and Visa and Amex are welcomed everywhere. Expect a friendly welcome. Buses leave every seven hours, and the staff are clean, friendly and courteous, and are dressed in modern clothes. There are many souvenir shops along the beachfront, and attractive locally-made handicrafts can be obtained at affordable prices. Buy your handicrafts at the end of the day, so you won't have the inconvenience of carrying them around with you ! Budget tourists are advised to stay away from the Islamic college sector, especially after dusk, owing to poor street-lighting, and the presence of hordes of unemployed negroes in bow ties. There is no nightlife to speak of, but the bored, simple-minded, info-barfed westerner can visit the local cinema, where he or she is likely to see the very latest films from Bombay. A bracing non-alcoholic fruit punch is served in the cinema foyer, and soft drinks and other refreshments can easily be obtained from behind the counter, but don't expect the very latest in Italian ice-creams ! Fortunately I had my fucking flask with me. Treat yourself instead to delicious locally-made beverages, such as Persian tea and coffee, made from the finest

local chicory. I'll try them next time - I stuck to Coke. The cinema stank of hash and piss, I don't know why, not very religious, if you ask me.

Towards the end of my trip I spent a lot of time on my bed in my hotel room, thinking. Sleeping, actually. Fuck, travelling can make you tired, it can knock you out, it can take away your brain and replace it with liquid concrete. I was resting, but only after I'd faxed my story back to London, that is. Of course the fax machine wasn't working, what do you fucking expect. I could see all of Iran from my window. I could have sworn I saw Michael Winner eating a first-class meal in the carpark. I thought of the words of some Japanese Buddhist or the other - 'Even these… even these…' Let's see: in six weeks I'd been rolled, lost all my traveller's cheques, travelled from one end of Iran to the other, seen and done everything, I was exhausted. But I couldn't get the thought out of my head, that, of all the bars and gin joints in all the world, this fucking hole had to come into mine.

I wonder if that pamphlet I bought in Whitechapel was even remotely true.

I'd quite like to meet the Galactic Babu; what a stupid fucking name.

Actually I think I once remember meeting him in Whitechapel.

He claimed to be the Messiah.

Perhaps he gave the pamphlet in person.

It's come to me; I remember it now, I've got it.

Here it is.

On the plane, en route to Iran, or en route out, the in-flight film was Chandler's 'The Long Goodbye', with Elliot Gould: all curried cat food, Sterling Hayden, and flagrantly illegal, blasphemous, and uncalled-for shots of dog turds in the street.

But I won't be putting any of that in my article; the sub

would excise it anyway, all they want is some piss about handicrafts, comfortable accommodation, and realistic prices, and budget meals, and blow jobs and tampon availability; they're not interested in fucking facts.

Anyway; Elliot Gould kills his best friend.

With a single bullet.

Straight through the third eye.

Now you see it; now you don't.

The author was a guest of Advance Iran International.

****

Love You, Zyra

Trouble at Gatwick Airport.

And JFK.

Make that Heathrow.

What the fuck does it matter.

Anyway; there was talk amongst the check-in staff that I was dead drunk; then, that my research assistant, a distinguished British academic in his very late fifties - School of Oriental and African Studies, for fucksake, you idiots - was not appropriately dressed for an international flight.

Why do they waste our precious time ?

Neither charge was remotely true; I'd hardly had anything to drink (less than ten units of alcohol in three hours) and, as far as I'm concerned, my assistant looked reasonably presentable in leather swimming-trunks, tartan bedroom slippers, and a somewhat frayed cardigan-like towelling jacket. Had he been wearing a shirt, his appearance could not have been faulted, and at least his hairy chest and distended gut appeared to be clean.

I was wearing a pair of what I had been told, by experts in London, were seagull-hunting breeches; some fresh rugby boots, and a fashion tee-shirt, with the surprisingly vulgar slogan 'Football Fuck and Dog Shit' splashed in big red letters across the chest. I cannot imagine who took the time and trouble to come up with that one.

My assistant whispered into my ear: 'Don't say a word, old

man. Keep mum, and stay dumb. They can't prove you're under the weather if you keep your mouth shut. If I remember right from last time, they're not allowed to lock you up without a court order. And I'll tell them you're recovering from a near-fatal, forty-eight hour brain operation, so the situation becomes a question as to what sort of bastards they are, to treat you like this. If need be, we can always repair to the aerodrome latrines and apply some form of bandaged poultice to your forehead.'

I nodded appreciatively, and stood, as best I could, to a military-style attention, keeping my bags and academic equipment at my sides.

His plan seemed feasible.

This is what friends are for.

And there are times when scholarly attention to detail can be at a premium.

'You deal with the fucking paperwork,' I said. 'I honestly don't think I can manage it myself.'

He agreed, getting out the passports, health certificates, tickets, bogus letters of introduction, fake CVs, bribes, and what-have-you.

I whispered 'Look here, old boy - I think I've got a tennis racket in my suitcase. Get it out and fiddle about with it. Tell them we're on our way to a sports festival somewhere. They might think you're a celebrity professional, and give us carte blanche.'

He guffawed at the drunken stupidity of my plan, yet turned me down, preferring to take his chances dressed as he was.

'Are you carrying any contraband ?' I asked him, sotto voce.

'Are you carrying a tennis racket ?' he answered, innocently.

'Good man,' I said, patting him on the shoulder.

But what did he mean ?

We both chuckled.

I wanted to be sick. We had both been smoking marijuana for some hours, and were well past our best.

It was all very silly, really, when I think about it now.

Somehow we managed to get past the Gestapo and board the Air Mauritius flight to Tiblisi.

And it proved to be a long and intellectually exhausting journey.

This was not going to be a Cox & Kings Tour.

Once airborne, and after the drinks trolley had been round a few times, and we had stocked up, my companion opened the serious section of our conversation with a dazzling display of intellectual pyrotechnics. I believe his intention had been to outline a phenomenological archaeology of the soul - of the sort any drunken college student could come up with.

But somehow never does.

Why ?

'Consider a distinctive Middle Eastern people, say a gaggle of worthless scum, like the Bedu - several thousand years ago.' he began. 'One of their number, wandering about the wastes of Arabia, counting sand dunes for comfort, and suffering from an all too common combination of agoraphobia and camel-dung toxicity, suddenly undergoes a particularly profound spiritual revelation. And on returning to the tribal marquee, he announces, to his astonished fellows: "Allah - god bless him - is sorely troubled with us. He loves the Arab mentality, with its petty vindictiveness and bog-shed stupidity, more than any other in creation, but there is one big problem. He finds our constant, date-fuelled flatulence very difficult to deal with. God knows, nothing is more horrible that dried-fruit farting, especially from a stinking Middle Eastern arsehole, but the difficulty is, the Lord cannot hear our prayers for all the noise. He is unable, for example, to distinguish our fervent requests for the death of our enemies, from casual emissions of date-based methane. To solve this problem, we must all

immediately plug up our anuses, so that God can hear what the fuck we're praying." Okay, so far ? So, what do you know, they all insert cleverly-constructed palm leaf suppositories, beautifully-decorated with arabesques, up their arses. Fair enough, what the hell, it's the Middle East, as James Baker would say. Walking is difficult, camel riding is a nightmare, but the Lord has spoken through his prophet, and we all know what that fucking means. Now comes the difficult part. How to show especial saintliness, or fanatical holiness ? Think about it, you prick. Of course ! A larger, more uncomfortable, more self-righteously ostentatious plug ! Now everyone is going around with these huge fucking things protruding from their posteriors, making locomotion pretty difficult, not to say unsightly, believe me. So fucking what ! It's holy, for christsake, it's what God wants ! Women and children are brought in on the act - 'plugging-up' is turned into a ceremony - and in a few generations the whole bloody thing is compulsory. Of course everyone farts as much as they did before - they just take the fucking cork out when they get home - but as a displacement gesture they are keen to lay blame on other people. Farting suddenly becomes a crime. Imagine it. Sanctimonious informers are everywhere. Groups of black-shirted fucks walk the streets in groups, slapping their faces until they bleed, shouting in unison 'Ali, where the fuck are our plugs ? Where are our fucking plugs, Ali ?'. You get the picture. Unrepentant weekend farters are stoned to death, and anyone caught farting in a mosque has a red hot poker stuck up their passages; as happened to Edward the Second. Saudi Arabia becomes the first 'absolutely spiritually fart free' country in the world, with Iran just a couple of squeaks behind, and so forth.'

'Are you serious ? None of this rings true,' I said, struggling to cope with some of the ideas, and feeling slightly irritated with the hectoring tone I felt creeping in.

'Be patient; I'm getting there,' he said, warming to his exegesis. He roared on, in an increasingly loud voice: 'Okay, okay: compulsory recto-plugging; saintly plug-enlargement competitiveness, the recto-mutilation of criminals; the whole fucking modern medieval Middle Eastern hamper, indistinguishable from anything that goes on there today. Now imagine a child growing up amongst these bum-plugging, face-slapping scum. He sees his father struggling to get comfortable on

a camel; he sees his mother shuffling stupidly about the kitchen, constantly sighing in pain and rubbing her crack, but he says to himself "Truly, there is no fucking other way." Along comes some satanic American who offers the kid the chance to study in the States, say at a cesspool of contamination like the Johnnie Cochran Law School, on a Bum-Plug Fellowship, but the kid is undecided, at least until after he's been properly plugged himself.'

'Yeah, yeah, sure,' I said, trying to get at a bottle of white which had rolled under my bloody seat. I knocked my plastic cup off the fold-up table in front of me, and red wine splashed all the way down the front of my shirt.

'Wait, wait !' he said, by now shouting at the top of his voice: 'We're nearly there, for godsake ! Eventually the kid arrives in the West. He's wearing designer Bedu robes and the he's been fitted with the handsomest, most ornate plug his family can afford. The fucking thing sticks out of his crack about three feet ! He's proud as fuck with his culture, his religion, and his society. He waddles the streets as best he can, a huge fucking smirk on his face, stopping to rest against a lamp-post only when the pain overwhelms him. Then, wouldn't you know it, some thoughtless Texan shouts out 'Hey you, kid ! What's with the fucking carrot up your ass ?'

'Will you two bloody well shut up !' roared a man in the seat in front of us, twisting around as he did so, and peering over the head-rest.

I let the in-flight magazine fall across my face, and pretended to be asleep.

My assistant exploded with alcoholic aggression. 'Clear off, you fucking bum-plugging lout ! Unless you want your fucking face creamed, you filthy fucking vulgarian !' he roared as loudly as he could, his words surely reaching the furthest depths of the aircraft. 'We're in international airspace now, you ineducable dogcunt ! Get back to your fucking eight-hundred and seventy-five page Stephen King novel, you Tolkein-reading fuck-brain, you fucking Romanian sex trafficker !'

The man in front turned away, looking horrified.

I nodded, pathetically.

My assistant went on with his account as if nothing had happened. 'So what does the kid do ? Does he take out the plug, throw it away, live a normal life, and risk the wrath of God ? Fucking hell no, forget it ! Instead he takes the Texan's address and tries to kill him, while drumming up political support amongst the Bum-Plugger lobby in the US Congress, and elsewhere, claiming religious discrimination. Farrakhan organises a million plug march, and rap negroes start fitting ultra-hip gold plugs, so let's kill cops, hey motherfucker. Suddenly it's ultra-cool to have a distended sphincter. Do you see what I'm getting at ?'

I wanted to, honestly.

So I thought about it, looking at mentally it from several angles, and bringing my not inconsiderable academic training to bear on it.

It was no easy task.

'Hark, he is calling Elijah,' I answered, after a pause.

'Precisely. Exactly. Magnificent !' he said, applauding me with a cascade of deafening hand-claps. 'Now we're getting somewhere !'

Eight years of philosophical study does bring some rewards.

'Yes, yes. But what if the Bum-Pluggers are theologically in the right ?' I answered. 'What if God genuinely can't tell the difference between our farts and our innermost prayers ? The accession to secular power of Middle Eastern religious leaders makes sense in this scenario. Have you thought of that, you fucking infidel, you fucking arrogant westernized dog, you fucking pornographer ?' I said, trying to stretch my legs. Then I added, 'By the way, do you think we could get into First Class ? If need be, we could bribe the waitress with some back copies of Santa Barbara Cocksucker.'

'Too late. I gave them to the purser,' he said, looking embarrassed. 'How do you think I got us these seats, you bloody dullard ?'

'What about our copies of Memphis Tit Fucker ?' I asked.

'No. I want to keep those in case we get into a tight corner in Afghanistan.'

'So what do we do, then ?'

'Let's finish these three bottles of red, first.' he said. 'Then we'll take a fucking walk. We'll kick out way into First Class, if we fucking have to. We deserve it. We're scholars and long-time academics. We're philosophers-at-large. We're fucking visionaries.'

I agreed.

We never left our seats.

Tiblisi, Baku, Dushanbe, Alma Aty, Mecca, Medina, Riyadh.

Jesus Christ.

Bishkek.

'Where the hell are we now ?' I asked my assistant as we arrived, in the white-hot sunlight, at what appeared to be an abandoned bus station, or was it an oil refinery, on the edge of the Taklamakan.

We were both by this stage very much the worse for drink.

I was nearly blind.

I really wanted to kill somebody, anybody would do, it seemed absolutely appropriate.

'I thought we'd check out Qom. I've got some contacts there,' he said, scanning the horizon like a boy scout.

That did it.

I decided to teach him a lesson.

Getting a fix on his position, I lumbered purposefully over to where I judged he was standing, and just about managed to grab his towelling robe by one of the frayed lapels. 'Are you mad, you bastard theologian ?' I screamed, full of the sense of purpose that

only alcohol can bestow. 'Khomeini's shit-hole cemetery ? With all that sauce in our fucking luggage ? We're almost a mobile liquor store ! Get a grip of yourself, you fucking idiot ! Every piss-brained revolutionary guard in the country will drop on us like black shit-flies on a Christmas pudding ! By the time they've done, you'd be praying for a fucking car bomb to drive by ! And your usual routine - telling them we're Russian clergy - is not going to cut the least fucking ice, now that the old Soviet Union no longer exists. For pity's sake, you shit-for-brains London academic, you bastard TLS book reviewer, you fucking departmental dead wood, what the hell are you trying to do to us !'

I tried to shake some sense into him, but couldn't get up a decent head of steam.

Suddenly a revolver shot exploded in my left ear.

I screamed at my friend to duck, they were fucking shooting at us, probably revolutionary guards, this was fucking serious !

But for some reason, he made no move to save himself; and he told me later that what I had in fact heard was the sound of his fist connecting with a very heavy punch to the side of my face.

These were not happy days, for the two of us.

We shuffled about in the sands in a mock-aggressive embrace, like exhausted sumo wrestlers, altogether too fucking fat and flabby to do anything decisive.

'Perhaps you're right,' he said after a pause, sounding bewildered, and steadying himself against a stack of empty oil drums, while still keeping an arm locked tightly around my neck. 'Okay, okay; we stay on the leeward side of the border. We stay here.' He pointed vaguely towards the ground.

'Sometimes, you really fucking make me wonder,' I said, squirming out of his hold and grabbing on to a metal handrail I found sticking out of somewhere or the other.

'I could be losing my touch,' he said, pulling disturbingly at his face with his fingers, as if to animate it.

Because as you know, when you've been drinking steadily for some hours, your face can sometimes go dead on you.

We could not have been a pretty sight.

Neither of us had had a good look in a mirror for twenty-five years.

Or would probably ever do so again.

'It's all right, old man,' I said sympathetically, and easing myself to the ground. 'It's the evil bloody atmosphere out here. It gets to you. Added to which is the constant sight of all these bum-plugging swine, wherever you look.'

He took a huge gulp from a bottle of slivovitz wrapped in a copy of El Ahram.

Holding on to a length of piping, he bent down and passed the bottle over to me.

Fuck the strength of the stuff.

Fuck it to hell, for all of our sakes.

'I say we book into an ashram for a day or two,' I suggested, lying on my side, and propping myself up on an elbow. 'Jesus. And check out the action. Finish off our duty free. Write up a few participant observation reports. Lay a bit of pipeline, if we're lucky enough to be offered it. Then, then, when we know what the fuck's going on, we carry on with our business. Then, and not before. Do you hear me, old man ? Hear me? Pipeline.'

'Good thinking,' he said, his legs giving way. 'You win.'

He broke his fall with his shoulder, and made a despairing noise like a bull being stunned at an abattoir.

I couldn't help him, and he couldn't help me.

Later, after the sun had set, and we were able to come to our senses - I was hoping we had died - we got an auto-rickshaw - a moribund tuk-tuk - to drive us to a village in a dust-swept plain.

And we managed to find - a good distance away from the unnecessarily noisy local bazaar and discotheque - an adequately clean boarding-house, with a first-rate third-floor roof garden, en

suite. Perfect. Excellent luck. Fucking wonderful. Even if the stench coming up from the irrigation ditches, and the septic tank, left a bit to be desired, but then this was 'Rough Guide' territory. We had food, shelter, running water, single malt and a fine stash of hash. Almost everything any British soldier could want.

What I would have done for a glimpse of female pubic hair.

But no.

And as I was climbing the stairs to our room I popped my head around the kitchen door, hoping to find a plate of chicken and chili samosas cooling on the window-sill.

But no, again.

Instead, an enormous, shapeless woman, cloaked in the requisite black tent, and looking like a huge, oily turd, listlessly tending a charcoal fire.

These stupid bloody women have a lot to answer for.

Not knowing I was there, she suddenly rubbed her crack in anguish; before letting out an exhausted, long-suffering, abandoned, sigh.

It suddenly occurred to me to ask her if she was wearing a plug, but the joke would have been lost on her.

Closer.

We caught a bus which took us into the foothills of the Pamirs.

By now I'd gone quite native, and had put on my all-purpose Islamic grey kaftan, which my wife had made up for me out of some curtain material which I think I bought in Malta. I used a length of hemp to bind the thing at the waist, and my feet were stylishly shod with a simple pair of sandals which I believe I won in a drinking competition in Corfu. I invariably skip shaving my beard east of Istanbul - everyone else out here looks like shit, so why not me ? - and with my grubby designer stubble and 'There

is no God but God'-demeanour, I seemed to give people the impression of being a senior theology student, or at least, spiritually deranged in some way.

And my being of indeterminate racial origin, not to say parentage, helped.

God bless the officer corps of the British Army, and McCluskieganj.

My companion, Professor Mohammed 'Siddiqi' (not his real name - although close - but certainly the one he was using on this trip), had abandoned his earlier costume in preference for a pair of semen-stained black boxer shorts, and a shocking blouse-like garment he claimed to have picked up at the market in Tashkent.

'You don't think I look like a right poofter in this fag shirt do you, old man ?' he asked as we roared past a madressa on a hillside. 'Some of these bastard locals are giving me the eye; and I could do without their attentions just at the moment. I don't want to have to get into another punch-up right now; it's really not appropriate behaviour for a mystic like myself. It's just that it's so difficult to keep a cool head in this relentless climate. Added to which, I left my spare fucking blood-pressure pills at my office in Russell Square.'

'No, chappie, you look absolutely fine,' I said. 'But maybe we'll try to get you something else to wear, next time we stop. Maybe a straightforward fashion tee-shirt, with a modern, not to say upbeat, slogan on it.'

'Fair enough,' said Siddiqi, flapping the front of his blouse for air. 'By the way, that bastard Mongolian wrestler sitting behind us, with his gigantic arse spread over two seats, is doing the most putrid fucking farts, and has been since we picked him up at the Blue Mosque.'

I handed him an enormous joint. 'Actually, it's me,' I said, sheepishly. 'Something to do with that explosive muck we had for breakfast. I'm now at the mercy of corporeal forces.'

'Christ, I thought we had a dead mullah in the hold,' said Siddiqi, unkindly.

'In a bum-plugging society, these problems would have been solved,' I answered.

There was nothing he could say to that.

East, south-west, due west.

'Where the fuck are we going ?' I asked Siddiqi as we prepared to board the umpteenth weather-beaten bus to nowhere.

He consulted a Pakistani newspaper. 'Leave it to me,' he said, and pointing to the passengers, added: 'We're joining a Cox & Kings Tour group.'

Then he switched into phrase-book Sindhi (not really his forte) and addressed the driver: 'Vehicular Technician ! Deepest salaams ! We are rustic hajis, inshallah, and gratefully circumcised tourists in your picturesque and completely modernized and democratic country, free of western degeneracy. Please monitor the scenery and put us off at 'Kabul Highway' as the very instant at which it is most relevant, inshallah.'

I was impressed with his confident delivery, as was the driver, but I don't think he understood what Siddiqi was getting at.

'What's happening there ?' I asked as we, again claiming to be mullahs, heartlessly evicted some Pakistani mental defectives who were in the seats we wanted.

'All in good time,' said Siddiqi, mysteriously. 'Roll me another joint, if you've got fuck-all better to do.'

I looked about the bus, at the congested assemblage of Central Asian peasants, derelicts, refugees, and walking wounded; crammed pell-mell into every available space. There were even some children and smaller farm animals stuffed into the luggage racks. Horrible old men huddled next to ugly old women; deformed destitutes cackled and blabbered like crazed beasts of the night. What a crew of fucking uneducated deadbeats. I don't

think I'd seen such a monstrously unsightly crowd since the last village.

'Are you sure this is a Voyage Jules Verne tour party ?' I asked.

Siddiqi, now looking to be suffering terribly from hashish intoxication, changed the subject. 'Do you see that cunt right at the back ? The one three rows behind us, in the aisle seat?'

I peered about, innocently. 'Curly boy ? The fag with the trussed chickens on his lap ?'

'No, no. The prick next to him, with the Iranian beard. The one with the stupid smirk, who looks like he might have trouble finding his own genitalia unaided.'

'He looks familiar, I must say,' I said, thinking hard, and holding the hash smoke down as long as I could. 'One of your old students ? The one you caught wanking during the Hindi movie ?'

'Sanjay Gandhi ? Not him; he died. Try again.'

'Died ! From jerking ?' I was astonished; it seemed so unfair. Poor Sanjay.

'Stick to the subject, you fucking chicken-brain,' said Siddiqi.

'Not the bloke you claimed was butt-fucking that transvestite in your India Department ?'

'No !' he said, irritably.

'Is he a cricketer, like Ian Botham ?'

'Who the fuck cares !' said Siddiqi, becoming visibly angry.

'A hugely recognisable face, but I simply can't place the baboon,' I said.

I felt a pat on the shoulder. 'Excuse me, dear gentlemen ! Salaams. Excuse my inexcusable rudeness, but I couldn't help eavesdropping your conversation !'

The voice came from a short elderly man, neatly dressed in a Nehru jacket and cap. 'I am Dutt, of Lahore; scholar,

astrologer, astro-physicist, and part-time necromancer; and principal inventor of the 'Grand Dutt-Bolus', a marvellously uncomplicated, semen-enhancing suppository; patent pending. I heard your confused musings as to the identities of the gentlemen at the back of the bus. Pray, allow me to inform you, and ameliorate your abysmal ignorance. The bearded gentleman is the poorly-apprised, much-reviled, anti-Islamic hack, Mr V. S. Naipaul; and his constant boy companion is quite obviously the homosexual talking-head and travel agent, Quentin Crisp.'

'What's he talking about ?' I asked, delirious with marijuana.

Siddiqi was not impressed. 'Don't you mean Andrew Warhol ?'

'I beg your pardon, you are quite right,' said Dutt, sounding a little flustered. 'What I really meant to say was, Bruce Chatwin.'

'Chatwin ? Here ! Where ?' I asked.

'Dutt, insert one of your boluses in yourself, and go fuck,' said Siddiqi, decisively.

But just then another elderly gentleman, this time in the seat in front of us - I'm convinced it was Ben Kingsley, or Yul Brynner - turned around. 'You are all quite wrong, entirely,' he said in measured, well-spoken English. 'Anyone at all with the slightest brains can see that the bearded man is the disgraced author of the Satanic Verses - one Solomon Rasheed - and that his attendant is a British secret service agent, a veritable James Bond, travelling incognito, and empowered to prevent him from speaking any further on Islamic matters.'

'My god,' said Siddiqi, rolling his eyes in derision. 'Talk about a fucking pub quiz. This is like the front cover to Sergeant Bilko's Lonely Band.' Then he asked in a loud voice 'Any other bloody offers from you fucking idiots ?'

'Peppers,' I said.

'Where ?' said Siddiqi.

'Forget it,' I said.

The passengers around us looked suitably chastened.

'Okay, so who is it, then ?' I asked.

Siddiqi pushed the smoke deep into his lungs, and then exhaled, slowly.

'It's Gerry Adams, gentleman terrorist and intellectual genius behind the IRA,' he said, after a pause.

I shot another glance behind us. 'Fuck me, it is too !' I said excitedly. 'The people you meet on these busses ! Honestly ! Look, there's Jayne Mansfield, next to those goats ! Get a load of her huge tits !'

'I'd love to fuck Demi Moore !' roared Siddiqi suddenly at the top of his voice, and making an utterly disgusting gesture with his fingers.

'No thanks. Give me Demi Moore, any day,' I said, flicking my tongue about, as if to lick her twat.

'Hey ?' Siddiqi looked puzzled.

Then I added, 'I wonder if Adams would agree to autograph an Islamic pamphlet I think I've got in my suitcase. And the shit-for-brains next to him, is that Art Garfunkel ?'

'Garfunkel ! Are you mad ?' roared Siddiqi. 'Fuck off ! It's Maqbul Butt, a demon ball-tampering off-spinner in the Pakistani B-Team.'

'But he looks lily-white !' I protested.

'Oh Jesus !' screamed Siddiqi, slapping the side of the bus, again and again, noisily, with an open palm. 'It's Martin McGuinness, you fucking half-wit ! Don't you know those two fucking high points of Irish civilisation are a double-act ?'

By now even the driver had turned around to see what all the fuss was about.

'All right, all right, old man. Keep your fucking plug in,' I said. 'So I'm just a dumb old black Paddy from New York.'

'Christ, I wish you'd bloody well pay closer attention to the international political scene,' said Siddiqi furiously, his eyes filling

with tears. 'Sometimes I think I'm travelling with a complete fucking jock.'

'Very sorry, old man,' I said. 'You're right enough. That was a bit thick of me. Okay, old man, okay. Look, I'll roll you another. Come on, old man, here you go,' I said, handing him the joint I was smoking.

'Sometimes you really fucking hurt me with your dumb fuckery,' he said. 'You must be the most poorly-informed scholar in our chosen field.'

'Have some of this, old man.' I said, selflessly handing him a snort of smack I was keeping for an emergency.

He accepted it greedily.

'Is that Ronald Reagan over there next to the driver ? I bet it is,' I asked, trying to make pleasant conversation.

'Eh, what's that, old man ? What did you say ? Adolf Hitler ?' said Siddiqi, collapsing heavily against the side of the bus, altogether too stoned on the heroin rush to appreciate the stunning views of the Hindu Kush that suddenly loomed into view.

Now.

At three-thirty in the afternoon, we ambled as a group, in single file, up a footpath which skirted a mountainside.

There were about forty of us in our party, which consisted mainly of armed tribesmen and suitably-bearded tribal elders. We climbed into a region that seemed to consist only of stones and slabs of shale and flint, as no trees grew there.

Siddiqi chatted in a low voice to his informant; I kept to myself.

The setting sun, reflected off the mountain peaks, bathed the valley in a soft light; displaying the rocks and stones and sharp sand as shades of salmon, peach and grey.

I understood the atmosphere to be solemn, as not many

words were exchanged between anyone, and the prevailing expression was unsmiling.

Ahead of us, the path led to a patch of cleared ground, about the size of a playing field, at the end of which another path snaked a short distance up a steep slope. There appeared to be a number of tiny cave-like entrances to the mountainside dotted above the second path, and a small group of tribesmen in grey turbans and flowing cloaks had positioned themselves some way up the mountain.

We joined with another loose group of a hundred or more people as we reached the clearing, and our numbers were swelled by stragglers I saw coming up other paths from other directions. Clothing by now was no longer uniformly tribal; some men had on trousers and shirts, and I noticed one man wearing a variation on a safari suit.

Nothing seemed to be happening; the men stood around chatting in low voices, though in a dialect I could not understand, but the topics could not all have been serious as a number of them grinned at one another, and I heard one or two snatches of laughter.

Siddiqi was looking pensive, and a little pale. He had a crescent of sweat along his brow.

Men continued to arrive in sixes and sevens from all directions, and the numbers by now had risen to several hundred at least, but although we stood as a loose crowd on the clearing, the gathering still had no apparent focus.

I toyed with the idea of going for a walk, but Siddiqi, although he would not tell me what we were waiting for, told me to stay put.

Then I noticed a flurry on the far side of the crowd, and the men appeared to be paying exaggerated respect to a man in pyjama pants and a white shirt, with a neatly trimmed beard. I thought him to be a designer mullah, but he turned out to be the local chief and government representative.

At this point the crowd appeared to disperse, or at least grow less cohesive; some men moving up the hillside, others

edging back down the paths they had earlier come up. The centre of the group had broken up to a greater extent, and it would have been possible to walk about in various directions on the playing-field unhindered.

Siddiqi's informant was now talking to him excitedly, and pointing at a group moving slowly in the direction of the path that led up the mountain.

'What's going on ?' I asked.

'See for yourself,' said Siddiqi, curtly, and not looking very well at all.

I could see a smartly uniformed soldier- in khaki fatigues - prodding, with a swagger stick, a slightly stooped figure hooded in white.

The gathering was now murmuring animatedly, and crowding in and around the group inching up the path, yet giving them room to move.

The policeman raised his stick above his head and struck the figure heavily on the shoulder.

A woman's cry, and the shrouded figure stumbled forward, and then dropped to the ground.

'Is it a fucking woman ?' I asked.

Siddiqi pursed his lips, but did not answer.

'Fuck this - I can't see what's happening. I'm going in,' I said, elbowing my way through the tribesmen.

Next to the soldier-policeman, who continued pushing, prodding and kicking the woman, now crawling on all fours, up the mountainside, was a bearded mullah in black, who alternately bent forward and harangued the woman in a lowered voice, or turned and proclaimed her sins to the rest of us. Between barked phrases, his lips - which were covered in spittle - quivered, as if he were about to weep in anguish.

The woman's forward progress had fallen to a snail's pace. She wailed and howled in repetitive phrases, in a restricted few animal-like calls and moans; almost as if it had been decided

beforehand the exact manner in which she would be permitted to express her suffering.

Her feeble progress up the hill was wasting our time. The mullah pushed the policeman aside and took a running kick at the woman's backside. 'Move it, bitch !' he roared, in Dari dialect. 'Move it, filthy bitch !'

Some men glanced at one another, and began laughing. Then ripples of laughter broke out about the crowd. The mullah took to kicking her repeatedly as if, as well as playing to his audience, he were incensed by the laughter,.

The woman was cowering now, and rolling rather than crawling.

The mullah bent down and, pulling back her sari head-covering, grabbed her by the hair and pulled her forward, moving several yards in a few strides.

A shocked, slightly angry hush fell across the crowd, as if disgusted by the woman's lewdness in showing us her hair uncovered, and in her thoughtless inconveniencing of the mullah by making him have to grab her to get her to move forward.

The mullah dragged the woman - by now making a disconcerting whooping sound - hooah ! hooah ! - half absurd, half pitiable - up to one of the small entrances into the mountain. Still holding her by the hair, and despite her shrieking and struggling, he twisted her head round towards us, so that we could get a good look at her.

And what do you know.

It was a predictably ugly, swarthy-skinned, buck-toothed, uneducated, sub-normal face; pockmarked and small-pox-scarred.

Her black eyes were lifeless; unseeing.

Then he turned to address us as a group: 'This bitch insults us ! She is insulting Islam !'

The men murmured in agreement, repeating the phrase 'She is insulting !'

'She deserves nothing !' the mullah roared, shaking her head back and forth with his hand to emphasise his words.

'Nothing !' I heard from several men, and I detected a sudden change in the intensity of their interest in the spectacle, a sudden expectation.

The mullah slapped and punched the woman's face, and began tugging at her flimsy sari, while screaming at her 'Take it off you filthy bitch ! Disgusting bitch !'

He pulled of her stained rags and, still holding her by the hair, punched her in the mouth, in an attempt to silence her hysterical screaming.

Not a pretty sight, believe me.

Was it meant to be?

Anyway; we were treated to the sight of her tired, cigarette-burn-scarred, dried out, sexless tits; her navel; her pathetic patch of matted pubic hair; the splotchy, unsightly birth-marks on her thighs; her spindly, stunted legs, dripping with urine and a thin, liquid faeces; the many truncheon welts on her back, and shoulders, and upper arms.

The crowd of men sighed, strangely; its interest intense.

The mullah leered triumphantly. 'You see ! You see !' he roared with satisfaction, as if she had deliberately stripped off as an act of lewdness.

'Disgusting bitch !' he struck her on the side of the head and slapped her to the ground. The soldier, unbidden, quickly moved forward, and bundled the woman head-first into the small rock fissure, no wider or deeper than a few metres, in the mountainside; kicking her into a crouching position, facing away from us, so that she showed us her anus, and the slit between her legs.

The soldier prodded her anus savagely with his swagger stick, to roars of laughter. Someone shouted in Sindhi, to frantic giggling, 'Don't stir your karahi with that now !'

The mullah picked up one of the rocks at his feet.

A stoning !

He explained to us that he wanted to crack open the woman's skull.

But just then someone objected that this would not be correct Islamic procedure, as this was an immuring, not a stoning.

An immuring !

The word sang of medieval sadism; it was like being around when Genghis Khan was alive.

Someone else piped up that it was acceptable to finish the woman off, if you wanted to, according to something he'd once read, or heard, or understood.

The argument became heated.

I kept my eyes on the woman.

She remained crouching and quivering in her rock coffin, no doubt paying close attention, as best she could, to these technicalities.

I was sure the mullah, beside himself with righteous anger, would bring the shale slab down on the woman's head, but instead he reluctantly placed it at the base of the cave entrance.

'Allah-o-akbar !' he spat.

As did the crowd, in a keenly rehearsed reply.

You simply had to agree.

'Allah-o-akbar !' I roared with the rest.

Suddenly everyone surged forward to grab rocks and stones and slabs, and pile them over the entrance, and on top of the woman inside, slowly crushing her to death.

I added a pebble of my own; spinelessly going with the crowd, perhaps.

Or helping her on her way; there was no way out of this one.

Within minutes the fissure-cave opening was no longer visible, hidden under the newly-made cairn; and the crowd,

satisfied, stood back, and admired its handiwork for some minutes; before beginning, very half-heartedly, to disperse.

Anticlimactic, in my opinion.

The whole episode had looked and felt like a stoning, but hadn't been; and as a decisive religious event, it lacked clear parameters.

Was the woman dead, or what ? And how long did she take to die ? She couldn't have lasted very long, what with a huge pile of rocks pushing down on her back.

I thought I could hear the faintest scraping noise; it must have been my imagination - I thought of a cockroach; a tell-tale heart, its legs still flailing, crushed under a brick.

I must say I felt a little tight-chested, but it may have been the high mountain air.

Cigarettes were lit; some tribesmen, to accompanying shouts of 'Allah-o-akbar !', fired their rifles into the air; others chatted volubly, explaining to one another their fascinating angle on the events they had all witnessed moments before; all bathing in the afterglow of a shared excitement.

Then some wandered slowly off down the paths; the mullah and government official had disappeared - we heard a jeep revving up some distance away - leaving the soldier to guard the cairn. He took out a packet of Lucky Strike and offered it around.

I took one. It tasted like shit.

Siddiqi, still not looking chirpy, stumbled over to where I was standing. 'Powerful stuff, eh, old man ? Islamic justice, tally ho, what !' Then he suddenly put his hand to his mouth and turned away from me.

'What's the matter with you ?' I asked.

'I'm going to be sick,' he squeaked.

'Get a grip on yourself, chappie, this is not our first public execution. We spent two years in fucking Saudi, remember,' I said. 'Do you remember the Filipino guy who was given two hundred lashes every week for eighteen months ? Now that's what I call

justice.'

'It's not the bloody woman,' he spluttered, 'It's that fucking Paki version of jugged hare we had for lunch.'

'I told you not to eat it,' I said, as he spewed over some rocks.

'Oh, fuck off, Dr Zhivago,' he said, wiping his mouth.

'Can I help you, Professor ?' said a dapper young Asian gentleman, in English, and offering Siddiqi a scented handkerchief.

'No thank you, Ahmed,' he said, before turning to me and pointing to the young man. 'This is Ahmed Khan of the Times of Karachi.' He gestured to me and added, 'This is Professor Daud Seyyid Ashraf of Harvard.'

Ashraf is not my real name (although close), but the one I had been using on this jaunt.

'I didn't see Benazir Butto here, did you ?' I asked Khan.

'Benazir ? Here ?' He looked mystified. 'I don't think so. She's dead.'

The soldier, hearing us speaking English, came over.

'Sharia law,' he said, with a triumphant smirk, implying that he hoped that, as a spineless part-westerner, I had learned my lesson.

Let me tell you, I fucking well had, I think.

'What was her crime ?' I asked.

He gave it some thought. 'Very bad woman,' he said to me, confidentially.

'Is she dead ?' I asked.

'Huh ?'

'What happens now ?'

'We go home,' said the soldier.

I turned to Siddiqi. 'I say old man; if you like, if you give

me the word, I honestly think I could kill this prick, perhaps with one of these slabs to the back of the head, and then maybe we could somehow disinter the woman ? Give her a decent Christian burial ?'

'Don't even think about it,' he said, sagely; before turning to gaze wistfully out across the valley behind us.

'Why not, for fucksake ?' I pleaded.

He paused, rubbing his stubbly chin. 'Look.' he said, putting a comforting hand on my shoulder. 'Let's understand the situation analytically. These filthy fucking part-Pakistani, part-Afghan swine are the lowest scum on the planet. Lower even than Iranians, or Egyptians, perhaps. Maybe not, forget that. But these are the very people who converted from the benign, if preposterously silly, Hinduism - which had previously been unsuccessfully reformed into Buddhism - to a religion of such disgusting savagery that it perverts and destroys the humanity of all who come near it. Lower than its debased, filthy, mind-numbing, soul-destroying, brain-deleting, catastrophically asinine teachings, one cannot sink. Human history had to wait nearly fifteen hundred years, until David Koresh, Jim Jones, or L. Ron Hubbard, for the advent of a philosophy even remotely as revoltingly psychotic as that fucking trash from the desert. At best, that 'radical revelation' was but an alcoholic re-working of Judaism, itself a piss-brained proto-Scientology - something any dumb-fucking Arab could concoct as he was sticking his head up a camel's arse. But you cannot change human nature; there will always be vermin who delight in cruelty, and in vindictive self-aggrandisement. Always. And these complete pricks invariably succeed splendidly in life; they lead countries, attract massive followings, and die peacefully in their beds, with women attending leisurely to their members, while the likes of us have to jerk off, apace, in the back seats of celebrity-filled Pakistani busses. God permits them the intoxication of self-righteousness; we have to make do with fourth-grade heroin, adulterated with Bangladeshi talcum powder.'

Wow !

I personally never touch heroin; a very dangerous and disagreeable substance.

But he had given me a lot to think about.

But what did it mean ?

Siddiqi glanced briefly at my face, sighed, and then lit up a Marlboro High Tar.

Then he continued. 'No, my poor dear boy. In truth, they did that desperate woman a favour. Imagine if you had to try to live in the same society as that mullah, or that soldier, or those many spineless trollops who come to a public execution for a glimpse of pussy. These are societies where the pig-ignorant and narrow-minded are celebrated; where the biggest fucking idiot with the stupidest fucking beard is believed to possess spiritual insight; where the most bestial, debased, craven and corrupt aspects of the most constricted, twisted and psychopathic soul are given free reign. They're so fucking illiterate, even their spiritual leader was unable to distinguish fact from fiction; a novel from a genuine attack on the filth he propagated. His head was so tightly positioned up his arse, he even needed someone to explain to him who Mao was !'

'But, Master !' I pleaded. 'You said none of this in your address to the International Islamic Conference in Malaysia !'

He raised a hand, to quieten me. 'We all have to make a living. Anyway, those bloody 'hanging and flogging' morons wouldn't have known what the fuck I was on about. No, no: the point is, none of these people can appreciate the magnificence of a Hendrix album, or the bracing goodwill contained in an episode of The Rockford Files. The men are quick-tempered idiots whose only perspective on life is that of the aggrieved; their only topics of conversation are sexual decadence in the west, and martyrdom by car-bomb. The women are listless, malodorous slobs, shuffling stupidly around overheated kitchens, endless preparing snacks for their ape-shit families, and doting over their podgy-cheeked, brainless, so-called 'boy children'. Christ, the women don't even know how to fuck properly; they so lacklustre and passionless, you'd be better off pumping a sack of potatoes. Can you imagine trying to satisfy one of these fucking turkeys, with her lying unresponsively beneath you, her eyes staring disinterestedly at the ceiling, her cold hands lying limply at her sides ? Hideous. These are societies where the homes are without books, human delight,

fellow feeling, or even Beatles' records.'

The soldier had moved a few paces up the mountain-side, and was urinating up against a stunted tree.

I suddenly realised that the reason I had been unsuccessful in propositioning the landlady of our boarding-house in Dushanbe was that Siddiqi was well ahead of me.

Siddiqi drew his penetrating account to a close. 'No, treasured companion. Killing one of these fucking dogs would be a foolish waste of the vital energy of western civilization. Our talents, humble as they are, lie elsewhere; as disaster tourists, petty drug couriers, sensation seekers, cable TV aficionados, and would-be-adulterers. And, if we ever needed an excuse to live life to-the-full, in the here-an-now, while-we-fucking-can, ponder this one: I guarantee you that the first person anyone sees when they get to heaven is the Ayatollah Khomeini.'

This was too deep for me.

'At least let me waste the mullah ?' I begged.

'Do you know where he lives ?' asked Siddiqi, insightfully, as ever paying scholarly attention to detail.

'I could find out !' I said, excitedly.

'No, my fiery, essentially-decent, if ridiculous, young friend,' he said, in a voice altogether mellifluous with spiritual wisdom. 'Our time in this ungoldly and pre-Beatle hell is coming to an end. We shall soon return to another civilisation, and to another era; where each and every one of us can buy their own Beatles albums, and listen to them in their own time, and not have to go to Friday prayers, and not listen to some stupid filth-fuck mullah expounding his debased dog-shit thoughts, and not have to go, after prayers, to a public execution, for edification. We can put on Abbey Road, followed by Beatles for Sale, followed by The White Album. And if that, my dear friend, is not enough, you can always put The White Album on again. And then again, after that. And so on.'

He patted me affectionately on the back, and began singing, in a heart-rending voice, the opening verse of 'Hey Jude'.

Huge, red-hot tears of confused emotion streamed down my cheeks, as we wandered along the path back to the village.

I spent some hours in Karachi on my own.

What a fucking dump.

Christ.

Siddiqi had gone off with some very unsavoury-looking characters to score a brick of heroin to pay for our return flights.

And in a dirty coffee-shop with an excellent view of the entrance to the Central Police Station, I ran into a young, long-haired Australian surfer-type making his way across Asia to Europe.

We chatted amiably about this and that. Having gained his confidence, I asked him how many hardcore pornographic channels there were on Australian television, but he didn't seem to care. 'That stuff is for wankers and poofters and Pakistanis, mate,' he said confidently. 'I make my own action.'

'What sort of action ?' I asked, hoping to be able to get back at him for this slight.

He grinned apologetically. 'Acid.'

'This is not the sixties, chum. You won't find any acid in this part of the world,' I said.

'You will, mate. There were a couple of old winos selling it in Peshawar,' he replied.

'What winos ?' I asked.

'It's true. I didn't see them myself, but a girlfriend told me. Two college professors; one guy from London, and the other from the States. A seven-foot poofter in Spartacus leather shorts, and another huge, fat, balding prick with a purple complexion.'

'Purple complexion, fuck !' I roared.

The Australian looked surprised. 'It's true.'

I would definitely have to get some more blood-pressure

pills as soon as I got back to Cambridge, Massachusetts.

I changed the subject. 'So, anyway; what have you learnt about Pakistani culture, while you've been here ?'

'Culture ?' he guffawed. 'Test cricket ?' He leant across the table and borrowed my cigarette lighter.

I was incensed. 'That's typical of you glib young people. You travel to a foreign country, yet you know nothing about it. You're sensationalists.'

'So ?' He slouched forward, unable to sit up straight.

'Well, that's just it !' I said, indignantly. ' You've moved into the sacred 'Realm of Islam - Dar-ul-Islam', yet the finer points of Islamic civilisation are unknown to you. What's more, I genuinely don't think you care !'

'Maybe not,' he said, toying with a bidi.

'How dare you ! My God, how dare you !' I roared. 'While Europe was in the dark ages - with your ancestors holed up in caves, masturbating at every corner - Islamic civilisation was flourishing all over the Arab world. Islamic scientists gave us the camel harness, the concept of the sand dune, and the Bedu tent. We would still be jerking off in caves, otherwise. Islamic culture gave us God-endorsed, institutionalised cruelty; rote learning of the Koran; the hidden woman; the non-existent woman; the goatee beard; and the toilet-seat beard ! Did you know that the Arabs have twenty-five, or is it sixty-five, distinct words for camel methane, whereas poverty-stricken English has yet to find a single one ? Islamic character development taught the world how to take offence over nothing in particular, and how to derive slights from the most innocent-looking situations, and how to nurse trivial and imaginary grievances for thousands of years. Fuuuuck ! Have you ever read the Koran ? Ask yourself why not, if you have any shame at all !'

'Uh,' said the youth, looking chastened, and becoming sullen.

'Did you know that the photocopier was an Islamic invention ?' I asked, pointedly. 'As well as the Kalashnikov ?'

'What the fuck are you on about ?' he snorted, looking annoyed.

'Did you know,' I sneered, cutting myself loose from strictly scholarly moorings - but what the hell - 'that while your ancestors were still shitting all over their caves in the outback, the first mobile toilets had probably already been installed in Arab palaces ? Did you know that Saudi jurists are incapable of making mistakes ?'

He fiddled with his fingers, probably as a displacement gesture for enuresis; I didn't take a course in fucking psychology for nothing.

I drove the point home, mercilessly. 'It seems to me, my dear young man, my fine friend, that your time would be more profitably spent in visiting your college library, and in reading some of the great works of post-modern Islamic literature - Ahmed Harold Pinter, Mohammed Chuck Bukowski, Thomas Haji Bernard, Samuel Abdul bin Beckett - than in watching pussy on Australian television, or in buying poor-quality acid off washed-up academics. You're probably a common fucking drug addict ! As well as being something of a clown. Overall, you're a fucking wash-out !'

I let these insights wash over him.

'So where do you fit in to all this ? You look like a Paki yourself,' he sneered.

High time for the coup de grace, I decided.

'Have you ever watched a sheep being slaughtered halal style ?' I asked.

He shook his head. 'Maybe on TV,' he said.

'With a fucking arsehole sporting a toilet-seat beard, busily mumbling verses while the animal struggles for life, with its throat cut ? What do you think he's saying ? Have you any idea ? Could he be reciting supermarket rates for meat ? Or the provisions of the health and safety act ? Tell me, you cunt !'

Again the headshake.

'Why fucking not ? Tell me ! Have you, for example, read

the hauntingly beautiful sonnet by Mustapha Willy Shakespeare 'Ode on an Excised Clitoris ?' I continued, going on to recite a few lines, in a sonorous voice:

'O exquisite barber, scimitar of Sheikh Hussain,

Who cleaned the bride, of the blob, that did reside,

Remained - unwillingly, betwixt the garland, purloined

Around the unsustained, in error withal, withdrawal,

My odour-free Islamic knob, the Koranic mane

in glorious Samarkand....'

He said nothing.

What could he say.

'Mmm,' I said, smugly, nodding like a fucking donkey.

He looked crestfallen. He was clearly devastated.

I felt a little sorry for him, in his dejection, and with his useless life. Stupid fucking first-year students; they seem to be everywhere, these days.

I lent back on my wooden stool and casually took a mouthful of greasy coffee from a cracked plastic cup. Sometimes it takes a Professor of Islamic Studies from Harvard to put you in your fucking place.

Which reminds me, I must speak to the Registry about getting a better parking space for next term.

Suddenly I could contain myself no more.

I stood up and, at the top of my voice, with all the testosterone my balls could muster, roared at the noisy Pakistani street. 'Fuuuuuuck yooou ! Fuuuuuuuck yooooooou ! Fuuuuuck !'

A little man in khaki shorts who had all the time been standing at my elbow chirped up.

'Taxi, Sir ?'

It was all very silly, really.

Wasn't it.

Some days later, one morning, probably at about the very time the Koranically immured woman was beginning to decompose, Siddiqi and I were lying on a beach outside a village on the Arabian Sea, some miles down the coast from Karachi.

I'd just returned from jerking off in the bushes; Siddiqi was trying unsuccessfully to sleep off seven bottles of local brew.

We were startled by the noise of running feet. In my reverie, I thought it the arrival of the Mongol hordes.

Our contact with the Times of Karachi came sprinting along the sands, his face aglow.

'Good news, boys ! More local sharia law !' he said, excitedly. 'A public whipping, in one of the villages !'

'What's it all about ?' I asked, sitting up on an elbow, and trying to work out whether or not we were being arrested.

'A little urchin fellow; five years old, a little scamp,' he explained, breathlessly. 'Caught stealing. They've tied him to a post. He'll stay there all day until the village finishes work. Then they'll bring a mullah; and then they'll try him, and then flog him. Maybe a hundred lashes. Maybe hundred and fifty ! Maybe two hundred ! The Saudi ambassador is flying out from London, to watch. Some test cricketers will be there. I will video, for distribution on the internet. You like come see ? You like come see ?'

I turned to Siddiqi. 'Let's get out of this shit-hole while we still have out sanity. I've had a fucking gutful of this Islamic gore-chasing and necro-tourism. Let's research something else.'

'Like what ?' asked Siddiqi.

'Let's go to Vegas.' I answered.

'And ?'

'Offer to lick any woman's crack anytime, without

payment, on-demand. Squander our research grants on experienced middle-aged ladies, with great tits. See which one of us will be the first to fuck Demi Moore. Jerk off in hotel rooms. Check out the very best in western civilization, while it's still here.'

'Yes, fuck, you're on !' shouted Siddiqi, springing to his feet like a young man, and doing a foolish dance, but farting violently as he did so.

'Okay, now you're talking !' I roared, punching the air.

'Bags we go and see the Beach Boys, if they're still playing.' said Siddiqi, breaking wind a second time.

'Bags we go to Siegfried and Roy.' I added.

'Fuck them. They've retired. Gorefest !'

'Cannibal Corpse.'

'Godflesh.'

'Fuck, this is going to be good !' said Siddiqi, rubbing his hands excitedly.

'Do you think, Master,' I asked him suddenly, 'that other than suicide, there is a way out of this godawful fucking life ?'

'What exactly is the way in ?' he answered, convincingly.

Good old Zen; never lets you down.

He was still farting as I picked up my belongings and started towards the bus station. In a truly bum-plugging society, God would not have been able to understand a single word we said.

****

Left for Dead

From an anthropologist's notes.

We drove on; shuddering about in a battered Pontiac, through mile after mile of sun-scorched rocky desert, along an almost empty highway - a terrible place; the wastes of Northern Israel, no one in his right mind would want to live there - before climbing slowly up into the heights that looked out over Syria and Southern Lebanon.

My driver seemed nervous.

I offered him a beer.

He pointed to his head, meaning no. He was toying with a smouldering marijuana spliff, misshapen and hurriedly-prepared.

'Gold ?' I enquired, politely.

He shook his head. 'Persian.'

I nodded.

I had hired him from an agency in Tel Aviv.

He told me that once we were in Falagh territory driving would be hazardous, as the Falagh, with their impaired vision, were by far the world's worst drivers.

I felt nothing.

It was ten-thirty in the morning, and I had already put away five cans of beer.

The heat was unbelievable.

I felt terrible.

I had the driver stop the car, so that I could get some extra beers out of the trunk.

I had some difficulty getting the key into the lock. It turned out not to have been locked in the first place.

I had some difficulty getting the bottles and cans out of their cardboard boxes.

The blinding sunlight, together with the airless landscape, made me feel I had been brought to life in someone else's disturbing dream.

I may have fallen over a few times. I managed to cut my forehead somehow, possibly on the edge of the open trunk.

My driver opened his door and got out to help me, but he seemed unable to find his way around to my side of the car.

'We will have to spruce up.' I heard him shout several times into the emptiness of the desert. I think he was speaking Hebrew.

We splashed our faces with water and then combed our hair.

He put an unsightly criss-cross of sticking plasters over the gash on my forehead. And as he did so managed to burn a couple of holes in my shirt with his spliff. But overall he could be said to have done a fair job of looking after me.

My clothes were dank with sweat, and flecked with blood and beer.

I was afraid that, with all the beer and the heat and the driving, and the soporific atmosphere, created by the billowing marijuana smoke, I would fall into a coma and piss myself, and have to go to the initiation ceremony with stained and stinking trousers.

The Falagh are not Jewish, not Muslim, not Christian, but they are, in terms of international law, Israeli, although the Israeli government, in a statement on the problem, claimed that most Falagh, although adequately circumcised, seemed to want to travel on Canadian passports.

The Muslims class the Falagh as Jews ('Jewish-scum-Falagh', they call them), and the Jews think they are Muslims ('Fucking Palestinians'). The Christians don't seem to give a fuck either way.

Strangely, there are more Falagh in Denver or Seattle than in Northern Israel.

They could be mistaken either for Hassidic Jews or Iranian mullahs; their appearance being somewhat similar: uniform black cloaks, podgy builds, simian beards, dreadful sideboards, alcoholic complexions, horrible black hats and turbans, and book-worm spectacles.

Hitler once said 'Jews are scum, but secretly I admire the Falagh.'

Their leader in New York, Yohah Norek, said on television recently 'We Falagh do not watch television. We know nothing about its filthy ways. Nothing. Television is pure filth, put about by scum, prostitutes, and filthy masturbators. To have a television in your house is just like have an open sewer in your living room, with shit oozing out all over your floor. Why have an open sewer in your bedroom, when it is much easier to turn your whole mind into a sewer ? Then your mouth becomes an open drain, or an asshole, for scum, and filth.'

And a passage from the Book reads: 'Think only of Falagh, yourselves. Think only of ourselves, Falagh. Say to yourselves, Falagh. No one can stray from the simple life of circumcision, clitoridectomy, oculision, scarification, infibulation and amputation. You must orchestrate the tensions of daily life so that you can never escape remembering the way of life of Falagh. Look at yourself in a mirror. See only Falagh there. Grow a traditional

beard. Look stern. Be severe. There is no humour in Falagh; nothing to laugh at. There are no jokes in Falagh. There are no jokes in the Middle East. Be serious. Wash your mouth out ritually, after each filthy act of laughter, according to tradition. And women, wash your filthy vaginas, again and again, according to tradition and ritual. Falagh. There is no end to this. No end at all. How can there be ?'

The settlement was perched on a hillside; a picturesque cluster of white-washed stone buildings; some modern, some older-looking; surrounded by an olive grove and rocky soil; with everything baking in the heat.

'What's this shit-hole called ?' I asked the driver.

'Horegh Shesh Bettna,' he answered. 'In Falagh it means, The Place in the Land Beyond Hell.'

'Quaint,' I said, writing it down.

After he had turned of the car engine, my driver slumped over the steering-wheel, stupified; his jaw slack, saliva dribbling from his mouth. 'Fuck me, I have sinned.' were the last words I heard from him, in Hebrew.

'Don't go away,' I ordered. 'And give the herb a rest for an hour or two. We're not at a fucking Dead concert.'

I didn't see him again until after the party.

By now the air was thick with expectation.

White Mercedes busses were disgorging groups of the black-cloaked dwarves. They greeted one another heartily; slapping one another on the back, booming with deep, manly laughter. They kissed one another on the cheeks, some had tears of joy in their good eye. Enhanced by the revolting beards and stupid headgear, it looked for all the world like graduation day at a university for the terminally insane.

The Falagh women eyed me quizzically. Their expression said, you are not one of us, you can never be one of us, what are you doing here ? They all looked to be of the same family; they all shared vaguely similar faces; and were uniformly short, fat, dark-

skinned, dark-eyed, black-haired, with big tits.

A large group of twenty or them stood around me in a semi-circle, and leered at me contemptuously. One of them muttered in Yiddish 'That man is a drek.' They howled with laughter, hiding their mouths behind their hands.

I took another warm beer out of the trunk of the car. And in case the settlement turned out to be a dry zone, I draped a six-pack in a Palestinian shawl and carried it under my arm.

We stood in an open courtyard, called the Dosheh (the place of truth), partially shaded by vines; the men on one side, the women on the other.

I must say I was starting to get a little bored.

But I needn't have worried.

A sudden hush.

Then a baby was brought in; it couldn't have been more than a few weeks old.

The group clapped and cheered.

The baby looked startled.

A group of men, their Dracula-cloaks swirling, gathered around it. What a bunch of fucks, I thought. What a fucking freak-show. I ached to be lying down in a cool place somewhere, sucking on a spliff the size of a bedroll, and reading a book by say, Suzuki Daisetz.

A priest, the ‘mosagh’, Dracula-in-chief, entered the yard from an adjoining room, with a flourish.

The gathering fell silent.

The priest held up his instrument, the ‘fazehdah’ (I think the word is of Persian origin); a tiny, thin ivory spike, like a long white barbed toothpick; a miniature religious harpoon, for the audience to see and, according to tradition, for the 'Lord God Most High' to bless.

A low, very masculine growl of approval went up from the men.

The priest bent over the baby. I saw him gently cradling its head.

His mouth moved in constant prayer. 'Zoleh sachal, soleh sachal, folleh sareghah.' (or some such mumbo-jumbo; I ought to have had my cassette recorder with me, but I lost it at the airport; I'm sure one of those cunts from Mossad walked off with it.)

Suddenly, with a deft action, and holding the baby's eyelids open with his enormous pink fingers, he forcefully stuck the fazehdah into the centre of the infant's left eyeball, twisted it quickly around three times, in strict accordance with tradition, and then drew it out. And, triumphantly, amid the baby's screams, he held it up for us to inspect.

Victory !

A cacophonous roar erupted from the assembled Falagh men and women, all but drowning out the most heart-rending cries from a child I have ever heard outside the Judeo-Islamic world. Or Africa, sorry.

Not to be left out, I threw my head back and bellowed with laughter. I let myself howl like a teenager in a cinema: protractedly, and cacophonously, and mirthlessly.

Some of the men turned to look at me. Continuing to clap and smile and celebrate, I shouted at them in Zulu: 'Wouldn't I just love to kill you with a hammer, you fucking Middle Eastern cunts.' They smiled at me and continued to celebrate the child's screaming. It was all very human, and most interesting.

The hapless baby, by now purple with screaming and writhing like an epileptic, was whisked out of the room by a proud but concerned mother, who clutched it lovingly. Men, their voices breaking with emotion, laughing and singing, slapped one another on the back, kissed one another on the cheeks. The women twittered like electronic birds, and greeted one another anew, as if meeting long lost relatives recently resurrected from the dead. There was dancing, and singing, and chanting, and violent ululating, underpinned by an aggressive but unsynchronized hand-clapping. Stupid-looking men were bringing their hands together as loudly as possible, as if desperate to increase the noise level. No one who has heard the Falagh clapping will ever forget

the experience. Each ponderous blow was like the end of the world.

Then discordant bazaar music, a type of savage klezmer, was directed at us mercilessly out of a gigantic tannoy system. Men and women danced frenziedly in tight circles. The collective merriment welled to fever-pitch; the bonhomie was electrifying. Wonderful.

Then, after a time, the din abated, and traditional bread was brought in, and broken. A nauseatingly-sweet purple juice was handed out to us in attractive fluted glasses. People were mumbling religious mantras. The whole scene became noticeably precious, and stank of piety and sanctimony. I felt waves of anger begin to cloud my judgement. Suddenly remembering a few phrases from an Icelandic language manual, I tried to engage some women near me in conversation: 'Have you pissed on this fish yet, madam ?' I asked one of them. 'Will that glacier flatten your house this spring ? Sodomy is illegal in Reykjavik.' And so on. The women avoided eye-contact with me, and turned away.

I took a long, thoughtful pull on a bottle of Elephant Beer.

I believe the baby was taken to the basement, an air-raid shelter, safe from Middle Eastern wars, where its hideous squawking would not disturb our party; and where a South African-born doctor, probably called Sonny Leon, would attempt to tend to its wound. Perhaps it would die from shock, but that is another story. As a boy, it would have been thoroughly circumcised only the week before, and was due to have some of its fingers chopped off the following week, as a mark of respect, in line with tradition.

Babies sometimes fidget a bit after these ceremonies, but there is really nothing to worry about. If correctly performed - as they invariably are - they are quite painless. Any fucking Middle Eastern mother can set your mind at rest on that score.

A burly bear of a man, a particularly depressing-looking fat shit, black cloak flowing, sailed over to where I stood. Batman, I sang to myself. His lips quivered with emotion. He said to me in kitchen Hebrew, or was it Arabic, or Turkish, I was becoming confused, 'We have a new little man now truly a part of our family. I am so very, very happy.'

'Me too, yes indeed,' I said in my best Yiddish.

'I only wish I could have performed the meklahla (the oculision) myself, but I am no priest,' he said, sadly.

'That's life,' I said, clucking sympathetically.

'Did you know that Moshe Dayan, the Israeli hero of the Six Day War, was Falagh ?' he asked.

'Was he really ?' I was amazed.

'Yes, yes. And the British Lord Nelson. Many very famous people. That bomber-Sheikh in New York. Possibly Beethoven. I believe he underwent auditory circumcision, with both ear-drums pierced by the fazehdah. After that he wrote truly spiritual music. And the mythical cyclops. That too represented Falagh.'

'I had no idea,' I said, genuinely learning something new.

'We don't drink beer here,' he said irritably, nodding at the bottle I was holding.

Yohah Norek never tired of saying 'When foreigners see your eye-patches, and black cloaks, and glass eyes, and shout at you in cinemas and restaurants, Falagh scum, we will put you in gas chambers, tell them 'Gentlemen, you are mistaken; we are fanatical Muslims, and very sympathetic to Nazism.' If they shout, scum Muslims, we are going to cut your head and hands and legs off according to Shariah law, say to them 'Not at all, Gentlemen; we are mere harmless fools, guitarists and beatniks, intent on making our way back to the Middle East.' Say whatever you like, because they are not talking about you. Whenever you hear yourself derided, think to yourself, none of this has anything to do with me. Some people are so bestial that they will even wear eye-patches in a grotesque attempt to be taken for properly-initiated Falagh. They think we are stupid, but it is they who are the stupid ones, believe me. If the worst comes to the worst, go to their universities and shout 'Anti-semitism !'; or 'Racism !'; or 'Imperialism !'; 'Orientalism !'; or something similar, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and presto, you will slip the net like an eel through a back passage. But when you have done with all this chit-chat, you must try to kill these people who are bothering

you with their silly ideas. It is for the best.'

I have always felt I needed to belong to some group or other. I have always felt left out, adrift, lonely, unwanted. My becoming an anthropologist was a somewhat pathetic attempt at my defining myself in academic terms, and at a constructive de-marginalization. What a pity my sons would not be able to undergo the simple meklahla, and have a sense of belonging - especially to a group whose history predates that of Judaism. What it is to have a family.

Falagh is a ancient word of uncertain origin, meaning 'People of the Eye'. They believe themselves the autochthonous inhabitants of the Middle East, and therefore the entire region belongs to them, obviously. Outsiders attribute special powers to the Falagh, like insensitivity, a lack of imagination, a dullness of the intellect, and an inability to see the evident. Falagh science says that the proteins released by circumcision and clitoridectomy improve the brain's adaptive capacity, especially its ability to marry contradictory concepts. Falagh children are every bit as stupid as their parents. Falagh men make excellent soldiers, and are to be recommended as cannon-fodder and suicide bombers. They also make excellent butchers, vivisectionists and military researchers. 'Animals do not feel pain.' a Falagh vivisectionist at Oxford University once carefully explained to me, and his account rang disturbingly true. He proved it academically with some experiments in the Woodstock Road, involving brain readings taken from animals which he himself crushed in a hand-operated mangle, under strict laboratory conditions. Read the journal article and see for yourself. Prostitution is unknown amongst Falagh women, even in Madrid, because they are all so spectacularly undesirable, and cannot attract clients, and although Falagh men like to fuck only white women, they have to make do with peroxided Turks and Central Asians, shipped-in to their joyless brothels from the former Soviet Union.

The old saying 'In the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is King' refers to the Falagh philosophy. A true Falagh woman will

tend to have the index fingers on both hands amputated according to tradition, symbolizing her renunciation of the sin of masturbation, and she willingly submits to clitoridectomy at the age of nine, with her parents' help. I think Germaine Greer, or was it Tariq Ali, once wrote an article calling for altogether less prejudice towards Falagh customs. Or was it Dilip Hiro ? I'll need to check. Uncircumcised women are mercilessly derided within the community. I have heard women shouting in Yiddish at these dirty girls: 'Hey drek-bitch, is your dangling penis bigger than your brother's ?', followed by gales of laughter. In this way the community maintains amazing bonds of family love. Even Jews admit that the Falagh have stronger family ties than they do, and that a Falagh mother's love is the envy of Jewish and Italian women everywhere. As soon as she can afford it, any uncircumcised girl saves up her money and takes a trip to Cairo or Khartoum, where she finds a barber to clean her up. Nobody likes to be different. Apparently a Mr Nasser of the Aswan Gent's Hairdressers, just off the Old Alexandria Highway, can be recommended, though he is inclined to be irritable, especially if the girl screams. 'I scrape it all away,' he says. But as I remember, you should always haggle with your barber over the price of a clitoridectomy, according to Fodor's Guide to Egypt; because it is considered polite.

The Falagh of Spain, before their quite unwarranted persecution by the Spanish Christians, started the sport of bull-fighting, although ordinary rank-and-file Spaniards claim it as their very own heritage. Falagh bull-fighting does not present as wonderfully interesting a spectacle as its modern Spanish counterpart, because the bull is traditionally blinded prior to being let into the ring. Hemingway described Falagh bull-fighting as 'junk.' Mario Vargas Llosa is reputed to have said that it was 'Altogether too intellectual' for this tastes. And of course the Falagh matador is only partially sighted, and so has to watch himself. But woe betide any matador who thinks that a blinded bull cannot inflict injury ! How easily people forget the enormous courage, not to say humanity, it takes to be a bull-fighter, according to an editorial I once read in El Pais. I wept buckets when Franco died.

For some reason the Falagh like to have themselves identified as a discriminated-against minority, although they are generally a very well-to-do community. 'We are the nigger-boys of Israel, and the coons of the world.' a community leader was quoted as saying. Yohah Norek told his flock 'If people ask you how things are going, always say, we are being discriminated against. If they dispute this, tell them of our practices, and somehow they will believe you. Show them your missing fingers, your amputated limbs, your pubic scar tissue. Invite them to Meklahlas. Tell them of our hygienic, circumcised women, and they will defend you in their universities. Their anthropologists will go on field trips, and seek to understand, and not to condemn you. And strange promiscuous women, with spiky hair and tattoos on their necks and buttocks, with pierced clitorises and rings through their nipples; women who listen to death metal on their stereos, and who will suck a man's penis in the street, and drink vodka straight from the bottle, will take your side, and shout down all the stupid old white men like Jesus Christ, Elvis Presley and William Kellogg, who have wasted their lives in colonialist oppression. But tell the Negroes that you are from Algeria, and not from their dark heartlands, like Zaire or Mali or Rwanda, otherwise they will hate you. Always speak the language of the Middle East, of the crazed, and of the fanatic. All this makes sense, believe me.'

Mao Tse-tung refuted the claim that the Falagh invented foot-binding for women. 'They bloody well did not,' he said. 'Foot-binding is pure Chinese culture, and not a barbarian invention by western scum. But in this progressive age, we must stamp out footbinding. I find no reference to it whatsoever in Marxism-Leninism.' Mao had his Red Guards denounce, and then execute, footbinders, alongside bookbinders, and possibly bookmakers. The study of Chinese and Japanese culture can be very rewarding, if only you know which books to read.

During the war, in Hitler's Poland, Jewish leaders were furious at being mistaken for Falagh. 'We are not going to be gassed in the same chambers as those bloody freaks,' a lovely old

rabbi was reputed to have said, putting his hand over his eye, and waving his arm around as if he were blind. 'Oh, for fuck's sake !' replied a Nazi, 'On paper there is not the slightest difference between you ! So why so fucking finicky ?' And the old rabbi was reputed to have answered, with a sigh: 'My dear Camp Commander, how little you Nazis understand our ways. How coarse you are in your thinking; how crude your conceptualizations. And, honestly, your failure to grasp our eschatology, and cirmumcisional meta-theology, is astonishing. Have you the capacity to understand, for example, that God will not permit a single uncircumcised penis in heaven ?"

There are apparently photographs in the Auschwitz museum of a room piled high with black eye-patches and glass eyes, taken from the Falagh before and after they were gassed.

Jewish monuments to the Holocaust contain no reference to the Falagh; 'Why the fuck should they be expected to ?' asked Yohah Norek in a now famous address to the United Nations. 'None of this has anything to do with us,' he added, before pointing out that such monuments make no mention of the Armenians, the Cambodians, or the Rwandans. 'Are you Falagh then denying the Holocaust ?' he was asked by a quick-witted journalist from the Washington Post. 'Are you mad ?' asked Norek. 'Don't be so silly. Without the Holocaust, without the European brouhaha, no one would give a fuck about people like us ! We would be just another horrific bunch of crazed freaks from the Middle East !' said Norek, referring to documents which proved that many Falagh had acted as cheerful accomplices to the Nazis. They had mistakenly thought that Hitler's Final Solution was to wipe out the whole of Europe - Germans, Nazis and Spaniards included - and not just selected groups.

For his complex, multi-faceted, ironic and at times very distasteful speech, Norek received rapturous applause from Third World delegates.

The oculision celebrations continued. But I had had more than enough of the dreadful Falagh ethnic music - worse than an evening of Mozart - which seemed to me to consist of a mere two or three notes, fourths apart, on a ten-second loop.

I also needed a good piss.

Badly.

'Where is the gents' lavatory, please, kind Sir ?' I asked one of the bowler-hatted apes.

'This is not a fucking restaurant,' he spat at me. 'Fuck off and piss in the desert.'

'I haff been doing dat all my bloody life,' I said in a German accent, giving a Hitler salute.

'Don't fuck with me, you filthy fucking Arab,' he roared.

'I'm not a camel rider,' I said. 'And though I travel on a Turkish passport, I am a citizen of the world. And anyway, Turkey has applied to join the European community. That puts us on a par with Sweden.'

'You fucking New Testament faggot !' he screamed. He was attracting a crowd.

I remonstrated in reply: 'Sir, I believe I qualify as a Muslim, and therefore demand that you classify me in another conceptual category altogether.'

'You black bastard ! You postmodernist fucker !' he shouted.

'Ah ha !' I said triumphantly, wagging a finger at him. 'Now we see !'

But something told me I was in danger.

It was time for a new tack. 'A new little man has joined our family. I'm so very, very happy !' I said, gesturing as if to poke my eyes out, and cut off my knob. I also pretended to have fingers missing from my hands.

'Fuck off and die !' he roared apoplectically, to murmurs of approval.

'I may do just that,' I said flatly.

And left them to their own truly impenetrable thoughts, and wandered off instead towards the car park.

None of this had anything to do with me, I said to myself.

I let my trousers and underpants fall to the ground. The warm desert air swirled between my legs, cooling my swollen gonads. An uncanny feeling of genuine liberation. I pissed away into the parched soil for what seemed like an eternity, filtering a dozen or so cans of beer, and almost changing the ecological balance of the region in the process. The whole situation felt positively religious; what with my being in the Holy Land, and a mere foreskin away from such holiday destinations as Iran, Iraq, Sudan and Saudi Arabia. Exhilarating.

And as I slashed away, I also did a series of thunderous staccato farts, which reverberated tellingly around the Golan Heights. I saw some Falagh guardsmen, worried about terrorist attacks, go for their guns.

I was by now much the worse for drink. I remember deciding to try to avoid the strong lager and stick only to those cans with five percent alcohol or less.

I put the time at midday. If only the sun would set; I had a shocking headache.

Suddenly I could swear I could hear, wafting up to us from a southerly direction, say from Tel Aviv or Jerusalem, the strains of the infantile and tedious opening of Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony.

But then, perhaps I was mistaken.

I continued strolling casually about the settlement, looking for something to study anthropologically.

As luck would have it, I came across a group of Falagh bobbing to and fro, in their hideous prayer ritual, which made them look as if they were fucking imaginary corpses. I thought I was at the Wailing Wall.

Then I noticed a curious thudding sound.

Whack. Whack.

These men were not praying !

They were kicking something on the ground !

But what ?

I ran towards the group.

My driver ! They were kicking my fucking driver !

'Don't let the bastard get away !' I screamed in Swahili, joining into the spirit of the thing. Then I shouted some words of encouragement in Falagh, an incredibly complex language, more difficult even than Ik, or Navaho, or Armenian. Only much later, when thinking back on what I had said, did I realize I had been speaking Hindi.

No matter, the group did not listen to me, eventually dispersing, and leaving my driver for dead. 'Get that beatnik cunt out of here.' someone said to me, in passing.

I cradled my driver in my arms and dabbed his forehead with a nice, cool, beer-soaked handkerchief.

But I think he was unconscious.

I managed to get him into the back seat of the car.

He didn't look very well to me at all.

What on earth could he have done to have so angered those scum ?

I went through his pockets for marijuana, and some spare change, as he would not be needing either or those things for the time being.

Despite their difficult customs and strict way of life, the Falagh have never wanted for converts, or new members. Yohah Norek spoke lucidly on the subject on cable TV, echoing passages of the Book: 'When our numbers run down, when the community is threatened, the convert is near at hand. Turn to the lowest of the low: to the racist, the bigot, the bone-head, the savage, the depraved, the stupid, the insane, the enthusiast, the student, the idiot, the academic, the vivisectionist, the dog-fighter, the bull-fighter, the bullshitter, the television journalist, the roaring arsehole. Look to the fanatic, to the fundamentalist, the nationalist, the patriot, the conservative, the royalist, the puritan,

the nazi, the zionist, the Islamicist, the punk, the hangman, the flogger, the wife-beater, the policeman, the purest scum of scum. Find the intolerant, the ignorant and the spineless. Look for religious garb; for the shaven head, the bow tie, the simian beard, the self-righteous smirk, the skull cap. We welcome the authoritarian and diseased personality. Tell these people gently of our ways, but there is no need to justify them; these fools will provide explanations for themselves. Show them your mutilated bodies, your tortured souls, your twisted and ignorant minds, emptied of all but Falagh, and the miracle of conversion will be at hand, and they too will join us. Tell them of the nightmare of the Middle East, and they will be won over. Tell them that whatever cruelty and stupidity they have come across, you bring them even greater horror, and they will be lost in admiration. Tell them of bull-fighting, of vivisection, of foot-binding, of all manner of casual bestiality, of all types of wanton stupidity, and they will warm to it. Tell them of Iran, of the Sudan, of Saudi Arabia, of Russia, Spain and China. Stress the concepts of 'belonging', and of 'family', and they will agree that no matter what is done in their name, they ought to accept it. It's hilarious ! And never, ever neglect the women. Tell them that you will cut off their clitorises with nail-scissors and poke out their eyes with pen-knives, and flog them, and deflower them in public, and humiliate them beyond belief, they will be the first to agree that this is exactly what God wants, and the best way for people to live. Tell them Iran will be like Disneyland when we achieve political power. Keep mentioning the word 'Tradition.' Our Falagh mothers' love is the envy of Jewish and Italian women around the world. The world will flock to our door. And so it goes. So it goes.'

And so it does. I've cut down on my drinking; I've finished my thesis. I've done two documentaries on Falagh for the BBC, or was it Channel Four; I've paid off most of my house and car. I've thrown away all my fucking Cat Stevens records. I no longer go to death metal gigs. Morbid Angel was a crap group anyway, not nearly loud enough. Falagh ought to be approached on its own merits, and not dismissed out-of-hand. Most people know fuck-all about Falagh theology; its complexity and profundity, and ancient

history. It predates Judaism, to say nothing of Islam, believe me. My parents never gave a shit for my true soul, and I envy the love shown by Falagh women for their children. My eldest boy, a strapping nineteen-year-old, is Falagh, and proud of it. I attended his oculision myself, a few years ago. At another more private ceremony, on consecutive days, he was circumcised and had his unnecessary fingers cut off. When he shouted out the traditional 'Yogh lev aghghah molella' ('Now I am a man !') I wept with joy, seriously. My daughter, who is training to work under some bastard vivisectionist at a lab in Oxford, is saving up to go to Cairo for a short holiday. I could save her the money with a pair of nail-scissors from the bathroom cupboard. My wife is as proud as punch with our fucking sanctimony. So am I. For some reason, I've taken to wearing a skull cap. I'm sporting a simian beard, I'm overweight, I wander around in pyjamas, and have developed a nightmarish speech impediment. My tongue has swollen up, completely filling my mouth, and I can't enunciate clearly. My every other word, slobbered out self-righteously, is Falagh, and rape, and masturbation. I look like evil incarnate, like fucking hell on earth, but who the fuck are you to point a finger ? Do you know how much crime there is, in western society ? Pornography will bring about the end of the world. Women must wear the veil, or be executed. Sometimes, of an evening, I'm really tempted to put out one of my eyes with a sharpened pencil. Our family knows where it stands. Getting somewhere at last.

'Are you blind ?' is a favourite Falagh phrase of derision. 'Two fucking eyes, but as blind as a bat !' they shout at the so-called 'fully-sighted', before laughing heartily. Booming laughter is often heard in Falagh homes, and Falagh elders love practical jokes. Falagh religious teachers are known for their playful sense of humour. Many are genuinely kindly old men, with a twinkle in their eye. Jesus.

You should not condemn what you don't understand. Western culture, ' Satanic Video Civilization' I call it, is now completely bankrupt, utterly devoid of a spiritual dimension, and quite directionless. Dark days indeed. Don't take my word for it,

ask George Steiner. Let us now turn to the Middle East, for guidance. Edward Said has, I believe, written an excellent book on Falagh, showing that any criticism of it whatsoever is basically a form of neo-imperialism, an ornamentalist orientalism, a crypto-fascism; a pro-western racism, a Euro-centric shit-headedness. I asked the New York Public Library to reserve a copy of his book for me, but they said that they couldn't find it on their catalogue. Are they blind ? Typical fucking racist acquisitions policy. You can buy a book like that from any and every fucking bookstall in downtown Tehran. Christ, what the fuck's going on.

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Paint

I was in my mid-thirties, and adrift.

I had my work - my day job - which I did without enthusiasm, though at least it gave me something to do with my time. At least I could fill up the hours of daylight, if need be.

What I really wanted - or what I thought I really wanted - was a decisive idea as to what I should next do with my life, as a whole. I was waiting for some kind of all-encompassing inspiration.

I suppose I was waiting for a cosmic revelation.

And as it turned out - as it inevitably does - I was waiting in vain, because the sidereal clap of thunder never came.

Yet I think I thought of my drifting, and my idle passivity, not as indolence or irresponsibility, but as type of active readiness.

And then, as always happens when you allow yourself to float rudderless and anchorless in deepest space, I crashed smack bang into a vicious hungry ghost.

She was called Yuko.

She was from Nagasaki.

And, unlike me, she appeared to have a plan.

I think it involved getting rid of my wife, so that I could lavish her - Yuko - with my undivided attention. 'When you kick out your fucking wife, then we will celebrate,' she told me. I let the statement pass at the time, but I ought to have picked up on it. I ought to have asked her what she meant, and what she wanted out of me. It might have helped me foreshorten my period of torment, though, such was my blindness, I very much doubt it.

Yuko was not pretty, and had reptilian eyes.

She was no geisha.

No Tokyo Lucky-Hole pin-up.

To me, her dominant feature was always her gaze, set in that reptilian yellow face, with its quizzical, faintly cruel, expression. Her teeth were jagged and crooked, and she made a slushing sound when she talked, and especially when she laughed. And she laughed a lot, particularly at her own jokes, though many of them I never got to understand, because she had a convoluted way of explaining things, and I often lost track of what it was she was trying to explain to me. Her command of everyday English had its limitations, and could sometimes sound primitive and uneducated, even though she was also somehow capable of composing lucid articles for academic journals.

She came from Japan to England, when she was in her early twenties.

She travelled alone.

She did not tell me why she came, though she never said anything to make me think that she was keeping a dark secret. Knowing her as I do, I suspect she ended up in England simply because she spoke some English.

Now she is middle-aged, and still unmarried - and still living alone - and she doesn't even seem to entertain any prospects of a partner. She is short but not squat. She has lank black hair down to her waist. She looks typically Japanese. She often wears

clothes which have a Japanese style to them. Her hair is always clean, and dead-centre-parted, and well-combed; but it looks thin, and is uneven at the ends, and never glossy. She has a nasal twang to her speech, and is not afraid to be confrontational. She has only rudimentary social skills, and is often unintentionally rude. Her cruel stare puts you at a disadvantage when dealing with her face to face. She would have made a great executioner.

We worked together in the same department at the University, although in different offices, and at different ends of a long corridor. I was involved in teaching, and she was involved in research, although she taught as well, from time to time.

I had seen her in the staff tea room a few times, talking monosyllabically to other members of the department and, when she glanced in my direction, she seemed to look at me disdainfully, or not see me at all.

As it was, I had no interest in her, and no plans to make her acquaintance.

But then one day I needed help with picture research, and Yuko was the only one with the knowledge I required. So after a few words of introduction, I found myself in her office, again and again, often for hours at a stretch. I would have a coffee at her desk, and she would occasionally accompany me by sipping lukewarm soya milk out of a flask. As part of the ritual, she would present me with some strange biscuits arranged in a circle on a red plastic plate. 'I going to feed you,' she used to say, firmly. 'You must eat it all up.'

Most of Yuko's biscuits were damp; some tasted old, and some were salty. I could picture them in transit from Japan, stacked in the hold of a slow-boat manned by sailors wearing kamikaze bandanas.

But insofar as her biscuits were not completely inedible, and not wanting to be rude, I did as I was told, and emptied the plates given me.

'Good boy,' she would say, as soon as the last biscuit had

gone. 'You are a good boy.' Her tone was that of an adult rewarding a child that had been coaxed into doing something it didn't want to do. She made it seem as if she had managed to breach my innermost defences.

Even though - and it only took a few weeks - I became used to the biscuits and her treating me like an intimate plaything, I continued to find Yuko very unsettling. She disturbed me, and I did not want to get close to her. Her patterns of thought and the way she expressed herself repelled me, and made me want to keep her at a safe distance. My repulsion began with her reptilian stare, and extended to the way she talked about herself and her life, and it ended with what I saw of the lair she had made for herself.

But there I was, day after day, drifting into a situation in which she was almost my only company.

I spent more time talking to her than I did to my wife, or my family, or to any of my friends, or to the entire group of them combined. This is not what I want, I used to say to myself, I don't want to spend all my time in the company of this crazy Japanese witch, listening to her crude and stupid opinions, and then have her tease me with sexual chatter.

The smell of her, and of her office - a mixture of Japanese seaweed and curdled soya milk - seeped into my clothes. I would smell her unexpectedly at odd hours of the day and night, sometimes at home, or on a bus, or in a shop.

I always found myself wandering into her in her office whenever I had nothing to do, and just sitting myself down in there, waiting for her to look up at me, and start talking.

And Yuko had perfected a certain conversational method, which began with an innocent observation, and then veered off spectacularly, and unpredictably, into subjects which often had me too perplexed to respond.

'You see news about Princess Diana ?' she asked one day, a seriousness to her voice as if this was of significance to the world at large. This was long before Diana's death by car crash.

'Last night ?'

'On BBC, or ITV. I don't remember. The news.'

'What did they say about her ?'

'Diana use the word "toilet".'

'Was that wrong ? Should she have used another word instead ?'

'She is a fucking princess. You can't go around using that word.'

'What did she say ?'

'She said she stuck her head in a toilet. You can't talk about toilets if you are a princess.'

'Well, maybe times have changed,' I said. 'People are a bit more casual about what can and can't be said, these days.'

'Yeah, yeah. Maybe. That's true. But you know, I have a horrible one.'

I stopped to think. 'Horrible what ?' I asked, after a moment. 'Horrible toilet ?'

'Horrible one.'

'What do you mean ?'

'You know. Horrible one.' She gestured vaguely below her waist, and then added, 'I can't talk about it. Fucking female trouble.'

I was confused. My first thought was that, following from the talk of toilets, she meant she had bowel problems. Lurid descriptions of stomach upsets was one of her favourite subjects.

'Horrible what ?' I asked again.

'Horrible woman's thing,' she said, and then added, flatly, 'Horrible hole.'

Another of her typical show-stopping pronouncements. I wasn't sure which way to run.

'Well, okay,' I said.

'I see you looking at Mrs Edward's one,' she went on, as if to help me understand what she was driving at.

'Looking at what ?' I asked.

'Trying to see it. I caught you. Trying to see her hole. You trying to get a glimpse of it.'

'You must be joking. I couldn't possibly see anything. She was fully dressed. There was nothing to see. For christsake, please, Yuko ! Are you nuts ?'

'I see you looking.'

'Don't be ridiculous. Honestly, it's in your imagination. It's not something you can try to look at when a person is standing in front of you fully dressed. It didn't enter my head.'

'Yeah, yeah. So you say. That what you say. But I see you trying to look at Mrs Edward's hole. I know it for a fact. But I still got a horrible one.'

She was determined to get me to pronounce on the subject.

'Yes, well, okay, I don't know, do I ?' I said, trying to find a positive angle. 'I mean, if you like, it's sort of up to a man, if you know what I mean, isn't it ?'

'What you talking about ?' she asked.

'I don't think it's up to a woman, if you know what I mean,' I explained. 'Because, when you think about it, if you can get a man to want it, well, then, it isn't really a horrible one, then, is it, if you know what I mean ?'

I felt I had cornered her with a compelling argument. This was Wittgenstein of the Philosophical Investigations. I was quite intrigued to know what she would say by way of reply.

'Yeah, yeah. But problem is, you know nothing. No man want mine. No man want to look at it.'

'Well, you don't know, do you ? You've got to go out there, somewhere, and, sort of, well, you know, test drive the thing. Flash it about a bit.'

'What thing ?'

'You know.'

'I don't.'

'The thing you're talking about. Female trouble.'

'Female what ? I got no trouble.'

'Oh jesus. Your horrible hole. Your horrible bloody hole,' I said, trying to keep my voice down.

'That what you say. But you know nothing. Women are a total mystery to you.'

'Okay. Well, yes, maybe you're right,' I answered.

'So how many people you fucked, then ?' she asked.

'Fucked ? That's a nice way of putting it. Well, I don't really think of it in those terms, but since you ask, well, not a lot,' I said. 'I'm not in the big time.'

'You said you fucked twenty-five.'

'No, not true. I never said that. I never said anything like that.'

'So how many, then ?'

'I, well, a few. Not more than a few. Just like anybody else. Average. Below average probably.'

'Twenty-five ?'

'No. Four or five. Six, seven. Ten, at the very utmost. I'd have to think about it. Look, I was a musician for a time. Jesus. Honestly, not many.'

'You told me twenty-five.'

'I said no such thing.'

'You did.'

'I did not.'

'Yeah, you did.'

'Stupid fucking life,' she used to say. 'Stupid bloody fucking life.'

Instinctively I agreed with her. It was the way I felt, too. It is a stupid fucking life. But where she made out that she was something of a victim, I believed it was up to each one of us to make the best of it. We should surely try to do something, or the fucking other, with our allotted time. Even if, like me, you spent much of it adrift.

'I put up with this shit for as long as I can, maybe another ten years, then I kill myself,' said Yuko.

By the time I first heard her say that - and she said it often enough - I had long understood that something had gone seriously wrong somewhere. So much so, that I allowed her morbidity to become matter-of-fact, and unremarkable. But, in a way, I felt vindicated by her despondent approach to existence, because I was convinced from the first that her cruel stare masked some terrible inner disability. And here she was, proving me right by talking obsessively about suicide. But of course the type of self-vindication I was indulging in was trivial, pathetic, and empty, because everyone you ever meet, from the celebrity gods to the damned, is wounded in some way or the other. It's not a profound observation.

'So ten more years of this so-called shit,' I said. 'Then you'll finish yourself off. And how old are you now ?'

'None of your fucking business.' She pretended to be shocked. 'You never ask me something like that. I could completely lose face. I could be thirty-five years old, and you think I'm eighty. So you never ask.' She paused for some moments, before adding 'Forty-seven.'

'Fair enough. So you plan on topping yourself at about age sixty ?' I asked.

'Maybe. So ?' she asked. 'So what ?'

'Well, you'd be heading towards retirement age. You might as well see your time out.'

She looked startled. 'Shit ! You're right ! I may be totally too old ! I might be senile. I might be completely Alzheimer.'

‘And you won’t be able to find your suicide pills,’ I said. ‘You’ll wander aimlessly around your kitchen, and you won’t be able to find your hara-kiri sword, even though it's lying right in front of your eyes on the table.’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ she said, nodding dismissively at my attempt at humour. ‘You shouldn’t laugh at these things. Very poor taste, you got. Maybe it better I kill myself much sooner.’

We were often involved in silly exchanges like these, with her speaking morbidly about herself, and me casting myself as the joker. On one occasion I tried to get serious, as a means to encourage her to explore her depressing self-obsession, but she reacted to this with anger, and shut the conversation down.

After a few years of increasingly fatuous chatter, she eventually she found a way to lure me into her lair.

‘You help me with my garden ?’ she asked. ‘I must have someone to chop a tree. I can’t do it myself. I need help. I pay you. Seriously.’

She didn’t want me to feel that I was doing her a favour, so payment would release her from any lingering obligation towards me.

‘I know you don’t need the money,’ she said. ‘But if I pay you then I don’t feel I exploit you. I pay you professional gardener rate.’

Her cruel stare was one thing, her house another.

Because if Yuko was trying to trap me in her web, then having me visit her lair was a strange way of doing it.

The house was a semi-detached end of terrace, in a leafy North London suburb, and quite unexceptional from the street.

Once inside, the first thing I noticed - besides the sickly smell of rotting seaweed and sour soya milk - was that there was no furniture anywhere to be seen.

The telephone lay on the carpet in an empty hallway,

which lead off into empty reception rooms. There were no pictures on any of the walls. A long, bare corridor lead into a gloomy kitchen, furnished with only a small plastic table and single plastic chair, close to the back door. Tattered fabric blinds covered the kitchen windows. The house felt empty, as if someone had long since moved away.

I remembered that Yuko had once spoken to me knowledgeably about classical singing, explaining that she preferred the mezzo-soprano voice to the soprano, and when I thought about her confident discourse, I would picture her sitting on the floor of her home, surrounded by CDs, listening intently to music on an old fashioned stereo system with huge black speakers the size of packing cases.

But there was no sign of any such system here, no sign of CDs.

She also said that she liked to watch crime programmes on TV, but I couldn't see a TV either.

'So where do you listen to your mezzo-sopranos ?' I asked.

'Huh ? What mezzo ? I don't have time for music,' she replied.

'You told me you did.'

'No, I didn't,' she said.

'And the telly ?'

'Huh ?'

'You told me you watched crime programmes on telly.'

'I got a little black and white portable in the kitchen cupboard.'

'Black and white ?'

'I'm not paying for colour. I don't like the colour of blood. I can't watch it. I like black and white blood only.'

'Fair enough,' I replied.

'You like tea ?' she asked politely, changing the subject, and regaining control of the conversation, and bending forward in

what I took to be the pose of a Japanese hostess.

'Please,' I answered.

'I make you tea. Just for you,' she said, opening the fridge and taking out a dirty-looking bottle of milk, encrusted with streaks of dried cream. 'But problem is, I can't make tea. My tea sure to taste just like a dog pissing in your mouth.'

'Not something I can say I've experienced,' I said.

'Huh ? What ?' she asked.

'Maybe I should do it, then,' I said. 'I'll make the tea.'

'Yeah, yeah, much better you make it if you don't like dog piss.'

'I'm fairly confident I don't,' I said.

'Nobody do,' she said.

'Teabags ?' I asked.

She handed me a faded box of PG Tips. 'They very old,' she said, giggling and slushing. 'Maybe more than ten years old. Maybe fifteen. My sister bought them from Tesco after she come from Japan. Maybe eighteen years ago.'

'That would explain the taste,' I said.

'I never drink it,' she said.

'I'm not surprised. You have a kettle ?'

'Boil in saucepan,' she answered, handing me a battered aluminium container with a black handle.

'This milk smells off.'

'Maybe. It a few weeks old. I don't drink cow tits. It's disgusting.'

Later, after encouraging me to take a few sips from the resulting putrid infusion, Yuko ushered me out the back door, and into the garden.

What a sight.

The entire space, say thirty by forty yards, had been caged over, to a height of perhaps ten foot, with a strong metal mesh, with the netting held in place - and reinforced - by a grid of thin steel bars. With the coarse shrubs and plants and weeds left to grow wild, and everything covered in a criss-cross shadow, I felt I'd been led into an enclosure at a zoo.

'Wow !' I said. 'The council let you get away with this ?'

'What you mean ?' she asked.

'Well, it's not exactly unobtrusive,' I said. 'And there's probably a clause in your house deeds prohibiting the use of residential premises as a prison.'

'Nobody in jail here,' she replied.

'Maybe not. But what do the neighbours think ?' I asked.

'I don't know,' she said. 'I can't be bothered with the fucking neighbours. This is my garden. I paid for it.'

'How long has it been up ?' I asked.

'What up ?'

'This extraordinary contraption.'

'Sixteen years,' she replied.

'That's amazing,' I said. 'Really amazing. It's like some sort of horrific artwork. It's somewhere between an Ed Kienholz and a Christo. You could seriously enter this as an installation for the Turner Prize. But what's it all for ?'

'I don't like to be raped,' she said. 'I don't want to get fucked.'

'Surely you don't need to cage up the whole garden to prevent that ?' I asked.

'Much better security this way,' she answered.

'How so ?'

'You can't get into my house.'

'Well, just lock the back door,' I said. 'Nobody can get into your house then.'

'Nobody going to fuck me in my garden,' she said insistently. 'Nobody going to get to fuck me on my grass.'

'Up the arse ?' I wanted her to see how absurd she sounded.

'Up the grass,' she repeated, ignoring my jibe.

'Okay,' I said. 'Okay. You win.'

She was paying good beer money for me to be there, so I was not in a position to speak my mind. 'You said you want me to chop something down ?' I asked.

'Yeah. Maybe that, or that.' She pointed vaguely at some bushes.

'Where's the tree you were talking about ?'

'No trees here,' she said.

'You asked me to chop down a tree.'

'Oh yeah. Maybe one of those bushes,' she replied. 'They're getting too big.'

'Okay,' I said. 'I'll chop up one of the bushes.'

'Not now. Later,' she said. 'We go inside.'

We went back indoors. She sat me down again at the plastic table, and then, after crashing around in a cupboard, brought out a wooden wine case. She upended the case, turning it into a crude seat, and then perched herself on it, next to me.

'Enough fucking garden shit talk,' she said. 'Now proper talk.'

'Proper talk about what ?' I asked.

'You tell me something.'

'Like what ?'

'You tell me a story,' she repeated. 'About your life, maybe. Something very interesting. Sex and murder. You fuck somebody. One of your twenty-five girls. Give me all the detail. That's what I like. Something disgusting. Something interesting that happen to you. You said you were a musician. You took drugs and fucked

many girls ? That's what musicians do. You talk. Tell me.'

'Is there something specific you want to know ?' I asked. I thought perhaps that she had heard some gossip about me at the University, and wanted the sordid facts for herself.

'You tell me whatever you like, but make it good,' she said. For once the cruel stare had softened slightly into an expression of determined, yet patient, expectation.

I thought for a moment, not having any idea what she had in mind, before suddenly deciding to tell her about a strange dream I had had a few nights before. Because I knew that, whatever it was I planned to say and, regardless of whatever motive it was that I had in mind that, as soon as Yuko got vaguely bored, or irritated, or threatened, by anything I said, irrespective of whatever ultimate value there was in what I was saying, she would immediately cut me off, and start talking about something else, as if I had not yet uttered a single word, or as if I had been sitting there quite mute all the time.

She was that kind of girl.

And I, most of the time, played along.

My dream began with the fact that I live in a huge Victorian Gothic house in Highgate, which has been converted into a warren of flats on several floors. There was bedsit in the loft, and it was occupied by a young student called Rikki, who always wore black denim and a black tee-shirt. She may have been a Goth. I named her 'Spiky' to myself, because of her short, black hair with a spiky crown. I saw Spiky almost every day, although only in passing, for perhaps two or three years, though we never spoke, other than to exchange a greeting. Then, one day, without warning, Spiky stopped me on the stairs and announced that she was leaving for good the next day, and going up north. I felt the news as a shock, but said nothing. All the best, if I don't see you again, I said. It was all I could think of to say. These flats were full of people coming and going, and no one seemed to stay there for any length of time.

But then, a night or two after her announcement, I had the dream.

Spiky and I were sitting at a table by a window, in her bedsit. She was staring at me, her face flushed. She pulled her tee-shirt up and over her head, and then threw it on the floor. She was beautiful, and desirable, as only someone in a dream can be. Her skin glowed with an excited body-heat. Then she grabbed my hands and put them on her swollen breasts. 'I think it's time, don't you ?' she asked, meaning that it was time we had sex. 'Yes, it is time,' I answered. Then, we were in bed together. The bed was warm and soft and comfortable and comforting, and suffocating feelings of dreamy euphoria washed over me. 'Yes, it is definitely time,' I said, reaching over to grab Spiky, and hold her close to me. But there was nothing I could grab on to, because she had disappeared, although I could feel her warmth on the sheets, as if she had just been lying there a moment ago. I began to drift upwards towards wakefulness and, running my hands across the empty sheets about me, found myself alone in the double bed - my wife having got up earlier - and although still euphoric with the warmth and cloying comfort of the bed in my dreams, I now found myself aching for Spiky, aching to hold her close to me, aching to the point of a physical pain in my stomach. And even though I was by now wide awake, and fully receptive to the demands of the day ahead, my longing for Spiky seemed to be all that I could think of. It stretched in every direction. This yearning lasted for several hours, persisting through a shower, and breakfast, and coffee, and Today on Radio 4, and even reading an op-ed rant in a newspaper.

'I'd never given this girl a thought,' I said to Yuko. 'I passed her every day, and never gave her a second glance. Yet subconsciously something must have been going on, some strange connection between the two of us, because it somehow exploded into this dream. Okay, you can say this is just my sexual fantasy, some sad guy winding himself into a state of sexual excitement, but I somehow really believe that maybe there was a mutual feeling there somewhere, or some kind of something, buried in that distant unknown realm we can never reach, or fully apprehend, or truly explore one way or the other. Even if I could have tracked Spiky down, and confronted her, and asked her if she felt the same way about me, she may not have been able to confirm or deny this mysterious sexual bond that had manifest itself between us through this dream.'

At that point, I stopped talking.

The story had ended itself.

And I also knew that if I overplayed the so-called mutuality I had supposedly experienced with this unknown girl of my dream, Yuko would have stopped me dead in my tracks.

My story ended inconclusively, without any kind of clear message. I let it hang in the air.

'That's it,' I said, staring coyly at the floor, as if I had disgraced myself.

Yuko thought for a moment, and then spoke. 'Yeah, that's a good story,' she said, leaning forward. 'You are really quite interesting to talk to. I like to talk to you. Nice language. No swearing and fucking cursing. Only very good words. Educated stuff. Manifesting, and apprehending, and mysterious, and stuff. Carefully chosen words. I like it. We talk again.'

She stood up. 'Okay, now you work,' she said. 'You earn your money.' She looked me up and down. 'You work in those clothes ?' she asked, pointing to my jeans.

'I brought a change, with me,' I answered, indicating a zip-up bag I had left on the floor.

'You get undressed ?' she asked.

'I suppose so,' I answered.

She showed me into a unfurnished ground floor reception room next to the stairs. The windows - uncurtained - looked out on to a neighbour's garden, which had a neatly trimmed apron of lawn, surrounded by cared-for flower beds. It must have been an unnerving experience - for these neighbours - to have had to live next to this oddly inhabited building, with its seemingly deserted rooms and curtainless windows, and its brutally caged-over garden. I imagined these neighbours finding themselves unavoidably drawn into staring into Yuko's empty house, scanning its vacant rooms for clues, and probably often catching sight of Yuko herself, floating into view, dishevelled and distressed, her cruel stare burning up everything it its path.

Yuko left the door to my room wide open, and walked back down the passage.

I felt it rude to close a door she had deliberately left ajar, so I left it as it was and, standing in a blind spot, discretely changed into my gardening clothes.

I returned to the kitchen.

Yuko was waiting patiently at the table. She looked me up and down. 'Yeah, okay,' she said. I took it that she meant I was suitably attired.

We went outside again, back into the cage.

She handed me a heavy garden spade. 'You dig big hole.'

'Where ?'

'Maybe here.' She pointed to a patch of thick grass.

'How deep ?'

She indicated by holding one of her hands above the other.

'That's deep. What's it for ?' I asked.

'I got a dead dog.'

'Dead dog ? What the hell are you talking about ? Where is it ?'

'Upstairs. You dig big hole. I bring the dog. We bury it. That all you need to know.'

That was a deal more than I wanted to know. Yuko had never spoken about owning a dog. She said she hated them.

I did as she asked, digging a hole to about three feet. Yuko went into the house, and then returned, struggling with a medium-sized brown suitcase.

'Jesus,' I said. 'Now what ?'

She ignored me.

I then had to dig the hole deeper and wider to accommodate the case. Yuko laid it flat on the earth at the bottom of the hollow.

'Cover it up,' she said.

'Um, well, you realise the suitcase will sort of, prevent decomposition, if you know what I mean. It will certainly delay it. Not even in Ghana would you bury someone in a plastic coffin.'

'Fuck your talk. You want to get paid ? Cover it up,' she said.

'As you wish,' I said.

I piled the dirt back into the hole.

I thought of the neighbours watching us, with mounting alarm, from upstairs windows, wondering what the Japanese devil-woman and her apprentice were up to, and what they could possibly have buried in the suitcase.

As we stood there, staring at the mound of dirt at our feet, we could hear a series of dull thuds which seemed to be coming from the street at the front of the house.

Yuko suddenly looked alarmed.

'Inside,' she said, grabbing my arm and pushing me towards the kitchen door.

'Why ?' I asked.

'We go inside quickly,' she said, slamming the back door closed and locking it behind us with a practised motion. 'A bad man come. I don't want him to know I'm at home. He mustn't see you here.' She looked genuinely frightened.

'Why ever not ?' I asked.

'He could maybe murder me if he found you here,' she said, peering outside from a crack between the kitchen blinds and the window. 'He told me he want to bury the bastard dog, and you not allowed to do it.'

'You're kidding me !' I said. 'Rivalry over burying a stupid bloody suitcase ? You told him I was going to do it, and he got angry with you ? This is ridiculous. I'll dig it back up, and he can rebury the damn thing himself.'

'I'm serious,' she said.

The banging, accompanied by long rings of the front

doorbell, grew louder, and more insistent. Whoever it was, must have been using their fists.

'Somehow he know you are here,' she said emphatically. 'Must be he can smell you.'

'Charming,' I said, but she did not see it as a joke, and continued to look alarmed.

'We must lie down on the floor,' she said. 'Come quickly.'

She scurried into the passage and lay down on the carpet next to the staircase. 'You lie down,' she hissed, patting the floor behind her.

I dropped to my knees and then to my elbows.

'Lie down properly, otherwise he see you,' she said, a look of real fear on her face.

The thumping on the door stopped. We could hear footfalls at the side of the house.

'He in the alleyway,' she whispered. 'Now he climb up the cage and look in the landing window.'

We could hear scraping against the mesh.

'Lie down,' she hissed again.

I let my face rest on the carpet. I turned my head to see where the landing window was. I could see the shadow of someone's head fall across the glass. There was a loud tapping on the window. It sounded aggressive. The shadow of the head remained fixed, as if the person's face was right up against the pane.

Yuko and I remained motionless on the floor.

After some minutes the tapping stopped, and the shadow moved away. There was a thump as the figure dropped off the cage and back on to the ground.

'This I have to see,' I said, crawling along the carpet to the front door, and taking up a position by a window where I could both see the front of the house, yet hide myself from view if need be.

A man appeared from the alleyway, and walked back to Yuko's front door.

I had expected the very worst - a shock-headed, toothless, Appalachian retard with a malevolent sneer - but this person was tall, and surprisingly handsome, with a strong jawline, and thick black hair in a boyish quiff. He held himself well, standing upright, with shoulders back. This was no deranged slacker. I put his age at thirty-five. His eyes were hidden behind expensive sunglasses. He was wearing a pale blue zip-up jacket. I thought his brooding expression slightly sinister, but then I had been taking my cue from Yuko's fearfulness.

I didn't know him, and couldn't place him either. He didn't look a university type, nor did he look like the sort of person Yuko would have met through her work. He wasn't Japanese, or even vaguely oriental. He must have been someone who lived locally. He didn't look like the kind of person I might have imagined Yuko to have had as a friend. More to the point, he looked absurdly normal.

He began banging on the door again.

Yuko scrambled off the carpet and, grabbing me by the arm, rushed me back to the kitchen, and we stood there in silence, listening to the attack on the door.

We waited for five or six minutes until the banging stopped, and did not start up again.

'You go now,' she said. She was trembling.

'You sure it's safe ?' I asked. It was not that I was especially afraid, but I wanted to give her an opportunity to explain herself, and explain this mysterious arrival.

'Yeah, he gone,' she said, clearly reliving a situation which had happened before, perhaps more than once. She looked preoccupied, and no longer interested in my being there. 'He won't come back today.'

'Well, there you go,' I said. 'I'll be off. Jesus, what a crater-load of fucking nonsense.'

Much later, long after the event, and thinking about the advent of the so-called Bad Man, I realised that it was the ferocity of his banging on the door which really aroused my interest. I tried to imagine what he would have said - and done - to Yuko, in the normal course of events, if she had let him in, and I had not been there. You don't normally attack someone's front door unless you are in some kind of fractured emotional relationship with them.

And I also realised that whatever lowbrow fascination I had had with Yuko, and her antics, had ceased by the end of that weird afternoon.

Before then I had occasionally hoped that Yuko had a better side to her, one that she had kept well hidden from me. I thought perhaps that I was responsible for her relentlessly grim conversation, in that I somehow encouraged her to talk that way; I even tried on the possibility that she spoke the way she did to please me, thinking that I was not capable of discussing anything other than abnormal bodily functions, suicide, rough trade, and the worthlessness of life.

Sweet thought.

But there was no better, hidden side.

The desolate house and the caged garden were Yuko's mental state made concrete, as was the suitcase burial, and the two of us lying like kids on the carpet to avoid detection by one of her pathological friends.

I suppose I had flattered myself that I was Yuko's only point of contact with the real world, yet here she was in a disturbed relationship with someone she had never told me even existed. It was a short step from there to the realisation that there were probably a number of us playing the silly game of being the 'good boy', and eating our biscuits, and listening to Yuko talk dirty, while being paid cash-in-hand to perform menial tasks about her house. Surely we were all coaxed into reassuring her about her horrible hole, or having to tot up the number of people we had fucked, and all the rest of it. I did not feel jealousy at the presence of others in the same porous boat as myself, because I was sexually repelled by Yuko, and had no designs on her, even if I had had a morbid

fascination with the day-to-day detail of her peculiar existence.

My guess was that Bad Man had been led by the nose into Yuko's twilit realms, where he had lost his footing, and was beginning to make a fool of himself. Yet she was hardly worth behaving in this way for. Yuko probably enjoyed seeing others behaving irrationally. She wanted people to fall off the edge of their worlds, as she herself had done, and have them join her as the living dead. She wanted me compromised in some way, so that I could be another damaged figure on her scene. She had set me up, with the dadaesque suitcase burial, as well as with my time spent alone with her, chatting about sexual matters in lowered voices, with an obviously artificial intimacy, but one which could easily be misinterpreted by others. They would have seen me as her lover. Perhaps she told people I was.

I had surely been led a merry dance.

I was ripe for a takedown.

But it all amounted to nothing, from my point of view, because there was nothing attractive to me about Yuko's world, either as a participant or as a witness.

From that day on, I could see full well that if I took my contact with Yuko any further, either as a casual friendship, or as an extension of our working relationship at the University, there would be a heavy price for me to pay.

Some weeks later I had a dream in which I discovered myself, to my horror, lying on a carpet somewhere having sex with a mysterious, ugly woman whose face I could not properly see, but I somehow knew to be Yuko.

I struggled to break free, but at the very moment at which I tried to withdraw, and get away from the situation, I felt myself come inside her, and there was nothing I could do to stop myself.

'Good boy,' she said, smiling up at me, when she felt me climax. 'You really are a good boy.'

My blood ran cold - I can think of no other way to describe it - and I awoke.

This Yuko dream meant something.

It was a clear representation of the degradation and passivity I had allowed myself to fall into, as well as an unconscious acknowledgement that my mental defences had been breached and that a virus had entered my psychic bloodstream. It was time to move on.

My Spiky dream meant nothing.

I've noticed that I've had many similar dreams over the years, and they have no significance beyond the moment. I'm daydreaming about girls all the time - my subconscious always seems to be brewing another achingly real imaginary affair.

'Where you fucking been ?' Yuko tracked me down by phone two years after I had last seen her in the flesh.

'I've been working,' I said.

She said she wanted to talk about computers. Which system was the better, Apple or Microsoft ?

'Depends what you have in mind,' I said.

'You still got your fucking wife ?' She asked.

I was surprised by the force of her question. Perhaps she was in a hurry.

'Yes.' I said.

'You need to get rid of her,' she said. 'Then we go for pancake. I pay.'

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jakob Zaaiman is an artist and writer living in London. He writes poetry as well as prose fiction, and he likes to create works that defy easy explanation. He has also written extensively on modern contemporary art.

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